McLEOD OF THE CAMERONS

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McLEOD OF THE CAMERONS

BY

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MC LEOD OF THE CAMERONS.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

"MRS. STODDART, I am looking for my stable companion. I suppose you haven't happened to see a tall man anywhere about the deck, with red hair and a swagger?"

"Well, the place is strewn with reviving invalids. Possibly he forms a nucleus for some of those rugs and shawls. But there's no distinguishing one bundle from another."

"I've searched several, and got myself disliked. I don't know where he can have got to. It's his first appearance since we left the Thames, and I feel rather responsible. He's had nothing but hard biscuits and whisky for two days, and he owes me half-a-crown for the sweep."

Mr. Grant had his anxiety under control; he gave a final glance round, and then drew up a long chair beside Mrs. Stoddart.

All the passengers of the P. and O. Australia, except the invalids who were not up to date, had been confidently waiting for this climax, and one or two officers near the smoking room who knew Mr. Grant personally had had a bet on the number of times he would think it necessary to saunter past Mrs. Stoddart's chair before he stopped there.

Everybody knew that Mrs. Stoddart was going out to Malta to join her husband, after being separated from him for three years, though it was impossible to say from whom the information had originally come. It had grown to be known in the occult way everybody's private concerns do grow to be known on board ship. And Mr. Grant's attentions had not escaped criticism.

A scrap of scandal was a godsend to a set of idle and

bored people who had found two rough days at the beginning of the voyage pass very slowly.

"It's rather dull, isn't it?" Christina Stoddart said; "everybody is looking suspiciously at everybody else, now that it is calm enough to think about grandfathers. And even the people who have not been ill have no energy. That pretty girl with the blue cloak asked me to play buckets just now, but neither she nor the men who played with us got one ring in six into the bucket, and they didn't even try."

"I don't suppose I shall be any better," said Grant, "but I'll play you after lunch if you like. Captain McLeod is the best fellow in the regiment for games, only he wouldn't come. He hates ladies. I need hardly say I consider him to have execrable taste."

"Hardly, indeed," said Christina, laughing. "And I can't say I feel very keen to make Captain McLeod's acquaintance, judging by your various bits of information as to his manners and customs."

"Can you make a woman more anxious to know a man than by telling her he hates women? That's the glaring injustice of it," said Mr. Grant, tenderly. "Shall I tuck in the rug at your feet? You are sure you are warm enough?"

He leaned forward and rearranged Mrs. Stoddart's wraps with an air of being completely engrossed by her, which came to him by instinct when he had anything to do with a woman. A remark about the weather from him had a tenderness and fervour of expression which made it almost equivalent to an assurance of eternal devotion.

He was a good-looking, pleasant young fellow, and he got through life very comfortably and happily, being thoroughly well satisfied with himself and all that concerned him. Mr. Grant considered himself the smartest man in the smartest regiment in the service.

He looked well, undoubtedly, and he had been more than civil to Christina; nevertheless she found him the smallest trifle dull. Just now, having had his society with short intervals since breakfast, it was beginning to pall.

She strangled a yawn behind her book.

"Is it nearly time for the next event of the day—

lunch?" she said. "I expected life on board ship would be amusing, but it certainly isn't."

"What an unkind remark!" said Grant, as she had felt sure he would, immediately after she had spoken. "Supposing my watch is right, can you endure me for a quarter of an hour longer? Have you amusing people at your table?"

"Far from it. I sit at one of the long tables, and I have on one side the fourth officer, who hardly ever turns up, and asks me disgusting riddles when he does; on the left I've an old man who never speaks, and opposite there are the most awful people you can imagine. They are a mother and daughter, called White, and the daughter has a fringe like a haystack and wears low dresses in the evening—you know the sort of girl. And they are going to Malta, I'm sorry to say."

"It sounds fascinating," said Grant, with sympathy. "I wish you were at our table; we have just some of our fellows and a couple of men in the Queen's. Is your husband in the service?"

"He is in the navy—on the Dauntless."

"I have a brother on the Dauntless," said Grant, with interest.

"George has only just been appointed," said Christina, eagerly; "what sort of a ship is it? Do tell me."

"You are a sailor's wife, Mrs. Stoddart, and yet you call a ship 'it'! And, if I am not mistaken, I heard you speak only yesterday of going up and down stairs?"

Christina laughed, but to Grant's amusement she coloured too.

"I didn't mean to make you blush for your ignorance," he said.

"It wasn't that," said Christina; "it is because I can't get used to hearing myself called 'Mrs. Stoddart.' It does sound so funny!"

Grant was decidedly surprised.

"Why," he said, "didn't you say you had been married for more than three years? Haven't you got used to it in all that time?"

"Yes—of course," Christina said, with unmistakable hesitation.

She was annoyed with herself for having spoken without thinking.

What would Mr. Grant think of her?

There was such decided question in his handsome blue eyes that she was half inclined to explain further, and probably would have done so if the luncheon bell had not come just then as an interruption.

It was impossible to say anything more not intended for the whole ship. In the utter idleness of the first few days of a voyage everybody welcomed mealtimes as epochs, and Mrs. Stoddart's chair was quite close to the companion.

"I suppose we had better put the rugs in the music saloon?" was all she said after a pause.

CHAPTER II.

Captain McLeod had established his deck chair in a comfortable corner near the smoking room, and was lounging half in and half out of it, playing languidly with a small fox terrier of the name of Jinks.

He had the deck almost to himself. It had been so unexpectedly calm all afternoon that a few energetic souls had roused their fellow-passengers to play cricket, and now everybody had gone down to tea.

McLeod never went in for ship games or afternoon tea.

In the smoking room whist and piquet were in full swing, and a little distance off a couple of men had found themselves a sheltered spot and were playing chess with businesslike silence and deliberation.

As the sun went down the sea was beginning to rise a little, and the ship was swaying with a deliberate motion not as yet unpleasant even to such a bad sailor as McLeod.

Now and then through the dusk he could catch a glimpse of the Spanish coast. It grew gradually into view and as gradually the side of the ship shut it out, giving him just a gleam of gray-blue water opposite in exchange. But this was only when a specially large wave came.

McLeod felt a languid sense of contentment. If the Australia were to go down at this instant, in this quiet evening light, he did not think he would take the trouble to fight for his life. If that were to happen, it would solve so many difficulties, save him from so much suffering.

Jinks, after waiting for some time, like a well-bred dog, to see if his master wished him to repeat any of his performances, had jumped up on the end of the chair, and made himself a very cosey nest in the rug; but McLeod was not taking much notice of him. He was thinking—trying to imagine the sudden sinking of the ship beneath him, the sudden plunge into cold water and darkness; in such a case, would he have the courage—or the cowardice—to keep his arms to his sides and make no effort to save himself, knowing as he did that it would be the best, the very best thing that could happen to him.

McLeod did not look like a man to let go life or anything else very easily. He was tall and well-made, with a plain, powerful face and grave, steady brown eyes under his reddish eyebrows. His hair was red and straight and thin, and was in his regiment popularly supposed to be a sore point with him, affording scope for innumerable friendly if not very brilliant witticisms.

A certain self-confidence in his manner was often put down to affectation and "side," as was a habit of withdrawing himself from general conversation if he was not interested and without concealment allowing himself to think of something else.

This afternoon he felt particularly unsociable. Grant, who took the trouble of strolling up the deck to inquire for his health, was by no means welcome.

But that he could be unwelcome anywhere was beyond Grant's conception. He was conscious of looking his best as he sauntered along the deck, had there been more daylight to do him justice. He was absolutely suitably dressed, as he always was, and he knew he had been particularly successful with his moustache, which was waxed into exact half circles.

He felt at peace with the world, and smiled benignly down on McLeod.

The absurd sense of superiority a good sailor feels over

a bad one had quite blotted out a certain uneasy jealousy which made him inclined to avoid McLeod on shore as much as one man in a regiment can avoid another.

"Got a light?"

McLeod shook his head. "You'll get one in the smoking room," he suggested.

Grant, under all circumstances, bored him to distraction. He had met him every day for seven years, McLeod had once declared in exasperation, and had never heard him speak of anything but women and clothes.

But his effort to get rid of him was unsuccessful. Grant only went just inside the smoking room, and came back again immediately.

"Faugh! how that place reeks of smoke and whisky!" he said; "do you know the bar's open, Tommy?"

Captain McLeod's godfathers and godmothers had given him the name of Andrew, and in the regiment he was generally called "Bones," for unknown reasons, but "Tommy" was a form of address indiscriminately used among a certain set of about the same standing.

"I am not going below till dinnertime," he said, playing with Jinks's ears.

"Feel like a constitutional?"

McLeod shook his head.

"The fact is," said Grant, in a burst of confidence, "I want your chair for a lady."

McLeod laughed. "Trust you to be looking after something in petticoats," he said; "but in the present state of my health you must really excuse me. Why not give her your own chair?"

"It's not half so comfortable. She sat in yours all yesterday and liked it immensely."

"But it's rather rough on me not even to have the reward of gratitude," said McLeod, placidly. Grant saw that he had not the slightest intention of moving.

"She's a Mrs. Stoddart—such a nice girl and very good fun," he said, "I am going to teach her to inhale cigarettes and play piquet this evening."

"Hadn't you better go and look after her, then?" said McLeod, by way of a delicate hint. But Grant stayed where he was; he stood with his hands in his pockets,

lazily letting himself sway backward and forward with the motion of the ship.

"Will you come into the music saloon after dinner?" he said; "some of them want you to play accompaniments, and that banjo breakdown of mine sounds nothing without the piano."

"My good fellow, quite impossible this evening. Can't some of those dozens of girls you know play for you, or there's that tall chap in the Queen's?"

"Well, there's a very smart little girl there awfully keen to know you," said Grant. His cigarette was finished, and he flung away the end into the sea, taking out his handkerchief to dust some ashes off his coat and sending a whiff of wood violet towards McLeod, who hated scent.

"Great Scott, what a smell!" he said.

People were beginning to straggle up on deck again, sometimes singly, sometimes in festive groups. There was nothing left of the sunset but a vague red glow in the sky, and there was an exceedingly cold wind blowing down one side of the deck. A shivering Lascar was going about lighting the lamps, which made little patches of brightness emphasizing the darkness round.

A few men and one or two adventurous girls began to try and keep their feet up and down the deck, but the ship was rolling more and more, and an occasional dash of spray made it slippery; they cannoned into each other and into other people at frequent intervals.

"Do you see that girl just under the lamp?" said Mr. Grant.

"What, the girl in the knitted cap with all her hair coming down?"

"No, no, that's the young woman we call the Man-eater. If she wants to get to know a man she goes and settles down beside him and introduces herself, and she was discovered after dinner last night in the fourth officer's cabin, sitting on his knee—a whole lot of fellows went in and found them. No, the methods of the girl I mean aren't quite so simple; she's the little creature with a sailor hat who nearly knocked that man into the scuppers a minute ago."

McLeod looked deeply uninterested.

"Well, she came up to me just now at tea, and she said:

'Won't you introduce me to that Captain McLeod in your regiment? I used to know a Mr. Geoffrey McLeod in the Civil Service in India, and I am *so* anxious to know if he is any relation.' Of course I said I should be delighted. There, I bet you ten bob she will walk past us now very slowly, and if possible the motion of the ship will jerk her against your chair."

"Then for goodness' sake let us go," said McLeod hastily; "this motion is getting rather too much of a good thing, anyway."

"No, no, sit still and I'll protect you; it's too late in any case. It's getting cold, isn't it, Miss Fraser? I don't advise you to go round the smoking room—you'll probably get a wave right in your face."

McLeod lay back in his chair, looking and feeling very unapproachable, till Miss Fraser retraced her steps, which was not for some time—not, in fact, till three or four stray men had made their appearance from the smoking room, and one had been told off to help her to look for a sheltered spot for her chair.

"I shall catch it for not introducing you," said Grant, with a laugh. "Can you understand, Campbell, what half the girls on the ship see in Tommy here, who won't look the same side of the deck with them, when they have you and me ready and willing to make ourselves agreeable?"

"My good chap, my personal charms—it only needs a glance to see——" said McLeod, modestly. "Hi! get up, Jinks; you and I are going below."

"Perversity of the sex," said Campbell, a small, freckled youth who had spent the last few years at the depot, and was going out to Malta for the first time. "Are you going below, McLeod? It's nowhere near dinnertime."

"Don't talk of dinner to me," said McLeod, tragically, "Good-night, you fellows—it may be a trifle early, but I am going to bed."

"A nice stable companion you are!" said Grant, and there was a general laugh, while McLeod, quite unperturbed, collected his rugs and whistled to Jinks.

"Never mind, Bones, we shall be at Gib. by one o'clock to-morrow, and I suppose you are going ashore."

"Rather!" said McLeod, with emphasis; "you don't catch me on the sea a minute longer than I can help. Besides, I want to look up some of the fellows in the Black Watch—Crayshaw particularly."

"But the Lord only knows when we'll get in," said Campbell. "A few days ago the captain said in time for breakfast, but the rough weather in the Bay kept us back, and the doctor says we mayn't have time to go in at all, and the second officer says we'll get in about four P. M. So you take your choice."

"Well, it's to be hoped we get in to Malta on Friday anyhow—it's the very limit of our leave, extension and all," said McLeod. "If it hadn't been for that d—d quarantine, I should be steaming across the continent in a comfortable train, instead of having a foretaste of purgatory in this cursed ship!"

And having thus relieved his mind he went below.

CHAPTER III.

"CAPTAIN McLEOD, you are drawn with Mrs. Stoddart."

McLeod was in the smoking room with a book and a pipe, rejoicing in the calmness of the morning and the prospect of at least two hours on firm land in the course of the day. He had not even noticed the entrance of Mr. Graham, an energetic, conceited young man, who was something or other in Ceylon, and who had established himself president and promoter of games and festivities of all kinds, and was known on board as "the Bounder."

"McLeod—you are McLeod, aren't you?—you are drawn with Mrs. Stoddart," the Bounder repeated.

"What?"

"For the bull tournament, I mean; Grant put down your name."

"Grant had very little to do," said McLeod, pulling at his moustache after a fashion of his when annoyed. "*I*

can't play bull—never did in my life. Put some one else in my place."

"Oh now, do come like a good fellow; you'll upset all arrangements; I shall have to change the whole thing."

The Bounder looked despairingly at his list. Almost every one had wanted something altered: some wouldn't play at the last moment, others objected to the partners they had been drawn with, and a third variety wanted to choose their own time for playing and make their own rules.

"Upon my word, I think I'll chuck the whole thing!" he said, tragically.

McLeod was quite sorry for him.

"Really," he said, "I haven't a notion how the confounded thing is played, or——"

The Bounder broke in eagerly: "Mrs. Stoddart will teach you—she's awfully good. Do come, for Heaven's sake; she knows she's drawn with you, and how am I to go and tell her you won't play with her?"

McLeod yawned, stretched, and yielded; in his opinion very few things in the world were worth making such a fuss about.

"I'll slaughter Grant," he reflected by way of consolation, and then he shook the ashes out of his pipe and sauntered down the deck with the Bounder, with Jinks at his heels, and a little extra manner.

Half the passengers of the ship were round the bull board, which had been repainted for the occasion, for this was to be a very grand performance indeed, and everybody had to pay two shillings entrance fee, to be spent in prizes at Gib.

It was the turn of McLeod and his partner to play against the doctor and a girl in a dirty red blouse, and they were all waiting for McLeod, which, however, was certainly not his fault.

He raised his cap gravely to Mrs. Stoddart when he was introduced.

"I am very sorry," he said, "to be late; but I knew nothing about this till five minutes ago. I don't know how to play in the least, and I am afraid you will find me a very bad partner."

Whereupon he relapsed into calm silence.

It was not that he meant to be rude; simply he had nothing to say, and consequently said nothing.

Mrs. Stoddart took a businesslike and real interest in the game, and played very well; her attention was fully engrossed till she discovered that her partner had a straight eye and a steady hand, and that their victory was a foregone conclusion.

But most undoubtedly McLeod did not look exhilarated; he picked up her bits of lead for her promptly, played carefully when his turn came, and amused himself with Jinks in the intervals.

Christina began to feel slightly piqued by his inattention, and called it "incivility" and "side" to herself.

"You don't seem very keenly interested," she said, abruptly.

McLeod had lifted Jinks on to the rail of the ship, and was amusing himself by blowing into the little dog's ears and making him shake his head.

From this engaging pastime he turned at once.

"Well, I hope we shall win," he said with a smile, "but I am afraid my manners are deplorable. I don't shine in society."

Christina thought to herself that he had a remarkably nice smile, and McLeod, after a pause, returned to Jinks.

But curiosity and perversity combined to determine her to make him speak.

Next time he had finished playing she intercepted him on his way to Jinks with a remark, her originality failing her, on the calmness of the sea. "I am glad to see you on deck. I am afraid you haven't had a very cheerful voyage so far," she said.

"It is an awful shame of Mr. Grant to give me away," McLeod said. "I am a wretched sailor. It's your turn, Mrs. Stoddart—we are for the right bull, coming back. If you take my advice you will stand a little more sideways."

"Play up for the honour of the regiment, Tommy," said Campbell, standing near. "McFerran and I have disgraced ourselves and distracted our partners."

"We are only five numbers to the good. Look here,

Jorrocks, I'll back our play at two to one, if you like," said McLeod.

But Campbell wisely shook his head, and went to pick up Mrs. Stoddart's leads, returning to where she and her partner were standing, and proving much more successful in bringing McLeod into the conversation.

He and Mrs. Stoddart were on quite friendly terms by the time Mr. Grant appeared, he having adjourned half an hour before for a whisky and soda and a cigarette.

He sauntered up with his usual benign appearance, his cap on one side of his head and a general air of satisfaction with himself and all the world on his handsome face.

"Hullo! Tommy, so you are in the height of society," he said to McLeod, who had just ended the game by a triumphant throw of three tens running.

"I'll thank you properly when we go below to-night," said McLeod.

"And let me further increase my right to your gratitude by introducing you to Miss White—that girl with the fringe like a horse's tail—you know her, Mrs. Stoddart," said Grant, completely unabashed. "She deserves it, for she has done her best to manage it for herself. I saw her trying on the chair trick this morning, but you walked past with your head in the air, and never even saw the unfortunate girl trying to fix her chair north-northeast, instead of due south."

Whereupon McLeod disclaimed any knowledge of Miss White, or any desire to make her acquaintance, and turned the conversation by an inquiry as to when they were expected to get into Gib., and Campbell was struck with admiration of a gorgeous pair of yellow boots, just then the most striking part of Mr. Grant's attire, and expressed his admiration loudly.

"Never mind, Tommy," said McLeod, "they'll look very fetching in the Strada Reale.—Mrs. Stoddart, I am quite at your service whenever you like to arrange for us to play again, if you wouldn't mind sending somebody to the smoking room for me."

"And, Mrs. Stoddart, it's just teatime, and I invite you to tea with me," said Mr. Grant. "Ship tea and ship buns, and 'animal grab' and 'up Jenkins' afterward. The

deck is really too cold, and we'll make a select party. Will you come, Tommy?"

McLeod ungratefully declined.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I daren't risk it; it would be as much as my character in Mrs. Stoddart's eyes is worth. The saloon is no place for any one not in the rudest of health."

With which he slightly raised his cap and strolled away, Jinks trotting at his heels.

"Well, what do you think of McLeod?" said Grant, as he and Mrs. Stoddart and Campbell went down the companion together.

"I should like him better with less side on and without such enormously high collars," said Christina, without enthusiasm. "He's not bad on the whole; he doesn't talk, but I don't think it is because he is stupid."

"It's not that, certainly," Grant said. "He's a queer fellow. Which table shall we go to? Let me make tea—I flatter myself I know how."

They were rather early, and there was an unfinished match at bull going on on deck, so they had no difficulty in finding a table for themselves in a comfortable corner and just under a porthole.

Then, after a few social amenities, such as Mr. Grant's requesting to know who had invited Campbell to *his* tea party, and Campbell's refusing to drink his tea unless made by Mrs. Stoddart, and with the sugar put in before the milk, the conversation returned to McLeod.

"He's an awfully good sort," Campbell said, helping himself largely to cake, "and he's had a queer sort of life. He studied for the stage for two years, and he was always mad about it—is now, for the matter of that. Then all of a sudden he chucked it—I don't think anybody knows why—and he never mentions the subject."

"But he comes out strong in regimental theatricals or at the garrison concerts in Malta," added Grant. "Let me give you some more tea, Mrs. Stoddart?"

Christina remarked that Captain McLeod had a very sad face; she had thought so the very first time Mr. Grant had pointed him out. Didn't he like the army as well as the stage?

"Poor chap," said Campbell, with sudden gravity, "if I were he, I should feel pretty down on my luck. He shot his greatest friend in the regiment about a year ago."

"Shot him!" Christina exclaimed.

Campbell turned to Grant.

"Tommy knows more about it than I do," he said. "I was at the depot."

"It is not a pleasant thing to talk about," Grant said, shortly.

"But you must tell me now you have begun," said Christina. "He didn't—*kill* him?"

"It was a fellow called Beresford," said Grant, unwillingly. "He was to have been married in a week, and a lot of us were going up to the wedding. McLeod was to have been best man. Beresford died the day he was to have been married in the most awful agony. McLeod nearly went off his head. It's not a nice story for afternoon tea, Mrs. Stoddart."

"Oh, *poor* fellow!" said Christina.

Neither Campbell nor Grant said any more, and there was a silence.

The thoughts of the two men were full of Beresford; he had joined on the same day as Grant, and they had been six years in the regiment together. Christina was thinking of McLeod, whom she had been inclined to laugh at as conceited ten minutes ago, and who she now thought more to be pitied than anybody she had ever met. But it was many a long day before she knew how much he was in need of pity.

Somebody came over from the next table and asked if Mrs. Stoddart knew that they would not get into Gib. till after dinner, and that it would be too late to go ashore. And Mr. Grant went for a pack of cards and collected recruits for "animal grab."

But Christina could not get McLeod out of her head, and lost her cards recklessly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE Australia got to Gib. at about eight P. M., and going ashore was hopeless. She had been delayed in the Bay and had half a day to make up, so she only stopped for an hour or so to put some passengers ashore and to take in the mails.

It was quite dark, but the moon would be up in time for a farewell glimpse of the rock as they steamed away, and that was all they would see of it. A good many people were disappointed, among others Christina Stoddart, who was anxious to see all she could.

However, when the mails came on board Grant went down to the cabin and got her a letter, which consoled her. Then, as there was H. M. S. Dauntless on the back, and she took it very eagerly, he left her and strolled off along the deck to find a group of men deep in their papers and full of the items of news they were picking up.

"Rough luck, Tommy," he said to McLeod, "though I can't say I care much about getting on shore myself."

McLeod shrugged his shoulders and filled his pipe.

"They have started their old hare of making us into Guards at the War Office," he said, "or at least the papers say they have."

"They'll never do it," said McFerran, "if they sent us to London I should be broke in a week. Those confounded strikes have pretty well done for me as it is."

"Of course if you represent that to the War Office it will be absolutely conclusive," said Campbell.

"They will give us a second battalion—that I firmly believe," said McLeod.

There was not much news in these November papers, but still everybody had some item to impart, and they might have passed the evening very comfortably where they were if Miss White's appearance had not cast the group into dismayed confusion. The Man-eater was a big girl, with a big fringe of black, frizzled hair, big features, and a particularly big mouth; every man on the ship knew that once captured, escape from her was almost an impossibility.

"I am sure you don't want to play that horrid whist, Captain Grant," she said, sweetly; "so do please get your banjo and sing us something while the ship is at anchor —it will be so romantic."

Mr. Grant, ever obliging, consented at once.

"Rather a shame if I didn't, as she always gives me my step," he said in an aside to McFerran.

And then Miss White turned to McLeod, and with her usual frankness began her acquaintance with him by insisting that he should come and play the piano to her, as she had heard that he played so beautifully; and as she was not a person to be easily repulsed, McLeod, who to do him justice had never been rude to a woman in his life, most unwillingly consented.

"Won't you be glad when we get to Malta and see the Pink Un and Poonghie, and have nothing more to do with women?" he asked Jinks confidentially, and, to judge by his extremely stiff reception of Miss White's caresses, Jinks fully agreed with his master.

But nevertheless McLeod and Miss White, with Jinks and a few old ladies knitting in a corner as chaperons, had a *tête-à-tête* in the music room, of which he never heard the last till he arrived at Malta.

It was a deliciously mild evening for the end of November, and every one else was on deck. There were two banjos going, and a good deal of singing, and at the end somebody turned up with a zither. A few people suggested dancing, but unsuccessfully, and then, McLeod having escaped, Miss White appeared, and started everybody to draw pigs with their eyes shut, and some of the men tried feats of strength and skill with chairs and tumblers full of water, which generally resulted in ignominious failure.

Grant was in the middle of everything and in his element, but his head being just then very full of Mrs. Stoddart, he did not fail to notice that she, who was generally so active and in such good spirits, had drawn a little apart, and was not joining more than she could help.

She looked quite pretty in the evening, he thought to himself; she had pretty eyes and pretty hair, and she was sitting half in lamplight, half in shade. Had she drawn apart because she wanted him to go and talk to her? Mr.

Grant considered it was within the limits of possibility, and that such a laudable desire deserved to be gratified.

But just then Christina did not happen to be thinking about him, beyond being quite conscious that he was looking at her. She was genuinely depressed, though without any particular reason.

She could not bear the Whites—that was the only distinct idea she had formed; their coarseness, affectation, and vulgarity made her feel positively ill, and yet sit opposite them she must at every meal till they reached Malta. She could not snub them or be cool; much as she disliked them, she had an unconquerable and inconvenient instinct which made her try to please everybody and to make everybody like her.

Then Mrs. White had announced at dinner that night that she had at last discovered Christina's name, and that George Stoddart was a great friend of hers; that her husband had been on the same ship at Halifax, and again for a year in China, and she hoped they would see a lot of each other in Malta. Was it possible that George would have anything to say to such people? But of course he must be civil to his messmates' wives and daughters. Besides, had not Mrs. White informed her almost in the same breath and with many significant hints that Beatrice had been so much admired—that the Duke of York had once entertained an admiration for her which had aroused serious anxiety on the part of the Prince of Wales; had she not, with a strong cockney accent and an occasional disregard of grammar, declared her friendship with all the most important people in Malta and elsewhere? Most probably there was about the same amount of truth in all her statements, and her great friendship with George consisted in a few formal calls—George was always so polite.

He had written a very nice letter too, a letter full of welcome and joy about her coming, and, often as she had been told she was fanciful and too particular, nobody could have imagined she would be so particular as to be annoyed with the beginning.

"My dearest old child"—it was a very *nice* beginning, and showed that he was fond of her, and, besides, he had begun that way a hundred times before.

She knew nothing about the way other men wrote to their wives; probably, for instance, Mr. Grant—she glanced at him—but no, she could not imagine that Mr. Grant would ever begin a letter "My dearest old child."

But George was worth a dozen Mr. Grants, and she would be very, very glad to see him.

The Australia was beginning to get under way, and innumerable Lascars were scudding about the deck and interrupting everybody.

The groups broke up gradually, and people strayed off in different directions to try and get a glimpse of Gib. by the help of the rising moon.

Mr. Grant and some other men came up.

"I suppose, Mrs. Stoddart," said McLeod, gravely, "that you can't balance a glass full of water on the top of your head, and lie down and get up again without spilling it?"

"Neither can you, McLeod, apparently," said Campbell, with a laugh, while Christina was too much astonished at his coming up to speak to her to say anything.

"Tommy can bear witness that I have often done it after mess," said McLeod; "it's being on board ship——"

"I won't take Tommy's evidence *after* mess," said Campbell, whereupon Grant, by a skilful movement, sent him staggering back into the scuppers, and began to tell a tale of a man in Malta who could eat a wine glass, if it were made worth his while.

"But the cleverest thing I *ever* saw done," said Campbell, when he had regained his breath, "was this evening, when the Man-eater descended upon McLeod and simply bore him off before all his friends! You had no more fight in you than a baby, Tommy, especially when she told you —I heard her distinctly—that the Highland regiments were the *sweetest* in the service; that the Cameron Highlanders was the sweetest of them; and, I lost the thread just then, but I have no doubt she added that you were the sweetest man in the Cameron Highlanders."

"It will be a long time before any one says as much to you, Jorrocks, anyway," said McLeod.

Christina had never seen them in such good spirits, and she laughed and brightened up sympathetically.

But presently they all moved away, except Mr. Grant, and his tone changed at once.

"Why wouldn't you play games this evening?" he said, softly.

"I can't stand the Whites," Christina said; "the way that girl speaks and laughs makes my flesh creep, and I *have* to stand it at mealtimes. The mother makes such a noise eating, and 'dear Beatrice' carries on the vulgarest flirtation you can imagine with an awful man who sits next her. I couldn't stand any more of them this evening."

"Yet when I first saw you I thought you were great friends, and certainly 'dear Beatrice' thinks you are," said Grant.

"Don't talk about them please," said Christina; "you must answer civilly when a person *will* talk to you."

"Come to the stern and look at the phosphorus," said Grant, "and we'll talk of whatever you like."

Christina was very glad; she did not want to sit alone any longer, and she liked Mr. Grant.

She had a theory that she only cared to make friends of clever men, and he was undoubtedly not clever; he was a poor thing, perhaps, but her own—just at present—to send messages, to neglect or favour with society as she liked, to look after her generally, and think out plans of amusement for her. He was exceedingly obliging and always looked well.

But Christina's head was far too full of George to waste many thoughts on Mr. Grant.

She had enjoyed the voyage immensely; she had made friends and felt at home, and now suddenly George's letter had made her understand that in two or three days this easy, careless life would be over, and for better or for worse a completely new one begun. Most of her new friends she would in all probability never see again; why not make a friend of this man—why not talk freely to him, and know there was at least one person to take an interest in her in beginning her new life—besides George, of course?

She had felt the same sudden nervous loneliness and aloofness to the rest of the world before, but never quite so strongly.

Kind and friendly as all her new acquaintances were, when they said good-by to her at Malta the rest of her life would matter to no single one of them—and why should it?

Always, as yet, Christina had been trying to avoid standing alone, to find somebody to share the responsibility of her life with her.

At home she had had a strong interest of her own to absorb her, and George's letters; now, when every hour was bringing her nearer to him, there seemed suddenly to be the full three years and a half of their marriage between them in her mind.

Grant, who she had known for only a few days, was more familiar and tangible.

Christina leaned over the side of the ship and watched the gleam of the phosphorus; she listened uncomprehendingly to one or two remarks from Grant; then she dashed into the subject of which her mind was full.

"Mr. Grant, I am sure you must have thought it funny when I said to you once that I was not used to being called Mrs. Stoddart?"

He was interested by this beginning at once; the dusk, the regular motion of the ship, the stray glimmer of moonlight fighting its way through the gray, cloudy sky, and occasionally lighting up the white foam the Australia left behind her—everything seemed to him conducive to sentiment, and the result of his large experience was that when a woman began voluntarily to talk confidentially about herself, the result generally *was* sentiment.

"I had no right to ask questions *then*," he said, softly, "but now that we are such friends——"

"The truth is that nobody knew I was married till a few weeks ago," said Christina, with a rush.

Having said it, she felt it sounded rather interesting.

"I was at school till I was nearly nineteen," she said, "and I was *mad* to come home; but when I did, it wasn't very happy."

She paused, and Grant felt justified in coming a little closer and touching her hand ever so accidentally with his own. They were both half in earnest, and only half, in their different parts, but Christina would have been

direly offended had the thought of a commonplace flirtation been suggested to her mind.

"There were—reasons," she said, "why I was unhappy at home, and it was dull—frightfully. Papa wouldn't let mamma have almost any one to stay that winter, and when he did, he wouldn't let me have anything to say to them without a row. Then mamma went to London for the season. I thought till the last minute I was to go. I was *mad* to go."

Christina could see herself white, despairing, while her father and mother exchanged the few bitter words which had decided her fate for another year. Another year—it had seemed such an eternity then.

Mr. Grant said it was a shame.

"Papa wouldn't go up to town or speak to mamma at all," Christina went on, "and at home I didn't often see him. He brought George to lunch one day."

Her thoughts would wander as her words brought back all that had happened to her. Her father had met George by chance, had fraternized with him over fishing, and had brought him up to Yardon Park to lunch, but not with the intention of introducing him to his daughter—that was an accident. Christina remembered him vaguely, big, clean-shaven, impetuous, but no effort could bring up a clear picture of his face. He had made no secret of his admiration from the first, and to a girl who had always been led to believe herself plain and insignificant it was very delightful.

"You will tell me the rest, won't you?" said Mr. Grant, and she roused herself with a start.

"That is almost all, I think," she said. "It began that day, and when papa first got an idea of it he was—*raging!* But it went on all the same, though he didn't know. Don't you think it was bad of me?"

"Perfectly right," said Mr. Grant, with decision. "I always do exactly what I like myself."

"Well, one day he told me he was ordered to China—would I marry him? It was very natural he should want that," Christina ended rather defiantly.

"Perfectly natural," Mr. Grant agreed again; "he was too wise to leave you free for some luckier fellow."

"It was the first time any man had ever asked me to marry him, and it was very exciting—and so—I said yes. I didn't tell anybody, because it would have meant such a row. He went to China. I was of age and got my own money a year ago, but as we had waited so long it seemed better to wait till he came to Malta."

"It is awfully good of you to have told me all this," said Grant.

"But it's just a little queer meeting him again. I only knew him three weeks, and since then I have had two seasons in town, I have been to Norway, to Homburg, and to Nice, and it seems like a lifetime ago. I don't even believe I shall *know* him"—and Christina laughed nervously—"he must have changed; anyway, *I* have."

"People do change," said Mr. Grant, somewhat as if he thought that he was stating the result of a discovery of his own. "I was engaged to a girl once before we went to India. I came home after two years, upon my soul for no other reason but to see her I believe; and then we met, and I didn't care a straw for her. She was all right, but, by Jove! the keenness was gone. Though of course it is quite different for you," he ended hastily.

"And what did you do?" asked Christina, eagerly.

"Broke it off—what else could I do? It wasn't my fault."

"Ah, but I'm married," said Christina, under her breath.

Then she was silent, thinking over this girl's case and her own.

"Did she not care, either?" she said at last.

"Gracie?—oh, poor little girl, I am afraid she did. But it was very—flat."

There was a complacent ring in Grant's tone which at another time would have irritated Christina.

"It would be worse than flat if that were to happen to me," she said.

Her love-making had been, she knew, hurried, born of idleness and extreme youth, and the awestruck joy of finding herself of importance to anybody. What if, as Mr. Grant said, the meeting was "flat"?

"I think I'll go below," she said, shivering a little, though the evening was not cold.

And they then discovered that it was past eleven o'clock, and that the deck lights were all out.

Mr. Grant strolled off complacently to the smoking room.

"I have had such a pleasant evening," he said. "Mrs. Stoddart was kind enough to take me into her confidence in the moonlight, and we enjoyed ourselves so much that we forgot the time."

"Will you cut in, Tommy?" McLeod interrupted, looking up from his whist.

CHAPTER V.

LONG before it was time to get up on Friday morning Christina was awakened by the extreme difficulty of remaining in her berth at all, and by a general condition of noisy motion all round her.

The day before had been very pleasant; people had begun to be friendly, and anxious to amuse themselves and each other; in the evening they had had a dance, and she had gone to bed in the happiest frame of mind, having put away all misgivings and being prepared to look forward to her arrival in Malta with unclouded pleasure.

It was depressing to awaken to such a morning as this. The ports had been made fast during the night, and were so blinded with spray that nothing could be seen out of them; everything unsecured was flying about the cabin—even her box, which was not a light one, was making erratic darts in all directions. In the berth underneath, the lady who shared her cabin was violently ill.

Christina's one idea was escape. She got up and dressed as well as she could, propping herself between the washing basin and the wall, and trying to avoid her cabin box, which occasionally dashed violently in her direction.

Then, after a dangerous journey through passages, di-

versified by meeting a couple of men in pyjamas on their way to the bathroom, she crawled up the companion and on deck, feeling herself a miserable object.

It was impossible to stand, and as the decks had just been washed there was nowhere dry to sit. It was blowing hard and bitterly cold.

Christina was impressionable, and her spirits sank to their lowest ebb at this unpromising beginning to the most important day in her life.

She stood drearily in the doorway of the companion looking out at the gray tossing water and cloudy sky; every now and then a rush of cold wind caught her hair and pulled it out of tidy folds, dashing something wet, whether spray or rain she was not sure, against her face.

Presently Mr. Grant and another man came straggling along the deck, and things improved appreciably. They abused the deceitfulness of the Mediterranean in concert. Mr. Grant said that to the best of his belief the wind was driving them on, not keeping them back; then they got a chair for Christina and lashed it in a sheltered corner, and brought her rugs, and were with difficulty persuaded to let her decline a tumbler of whisky and soda to make her warm. Finally Grant sat down on the end of her chair, and borrowed a share of her rug.

"No Captain McLeod this morning, I suppose?" said Christina.

"He has got a sad expression to-day with a vengeance!" said Grant, laughing.

"So I shall never see him more," said Christina. "I rather wanted to, for I have just discovered I was at school with his cousin, Gerty Russell-Boyd."

"You know his people then, perhaps? His eldest brother, Lord Drumesk, is a convict or a lunatic, or something unpleasant. At anyrate, I know the estates and so on are no good to him, and yet he keeps McLeod out. But I can be much more useful to you than he when we get to Malta. Mind you always let me know when you want tickets for club dances or race meetings."

Christina thanked him quite warmly—for all she knew, tickets for club dances and race meetings might be the most difficult things in the world to get—and moved by her

gratitude he rose to more generous offers. She must come to tea with him on guard, and soon, too, for he expected to get his company in a month or so; there was one of his ponies he felt sure would carry a lady——

Christina realized that Malta was indeed near.

Grant came to breakfast with her, as there were plenty of vacancies at table, and they were quite gay.

About one o'clock the sea began to grow calm, as they came in sight of Gozo, and Christina, to make sure of being in time, went down to her cabin, finished packing, and got ready to go ashore.

She must look her very best; she was wearing a blue serge coat and skirt, and she changed her shirt twice and her tie a dozen times before she felt satisfied. Mr. Grant himself could not have been more particular.

She put a new black ribbon on her sailor hat, and got out her very smartest shoes and stockings.

Then she looked in the glass.

No, George would not find her changed for the worse.

At nineteen she had still been a little unfinished and awkward; she had not known how to put on her clothes, and her manner had lacked confidence.

Now, though she did not consider herself pretty, she knew she looked smart, that she held herself well, and that she was perfectly at her ease.

If George remembered her as she had been, he would not be disappointed in her appearance, and if he were disappointed in anything else, it would not be her fault. Never, if she could help it, should there be between them quarrels and jealousies and recriminations, such as had made her home in England a miserable one. Her home life had taught her that, at anyrate, if it had taught her other less desirable things.

She went up again on deck. They did not seem to have advanced much, and Christina thought she had never spent such an endless day in her life.

Later on Captain McLeod made his first appearance on deck.

"I shall be as glad as you when we get in, Mrs. Stoddart," he said. "Grant is a brute. He awakened me to misery by starting to smoke cigarettes in his berth at an unholy

hour this morning, and then when I was trying to get to sleep he must needs have himself shaved, and finally he woke me up to ask me what I would have for *breakfast!* What a beastly voyage we've had—I knew we would, when we started on a Friday."

Christina asked if he really believed in Friday as unlucky, because, if true, it was rather unfortunate for her. McLeod said he really did, but hoped this particular Friday would be an exception for her, and was sure it would for him, as the limit of his desires at present was to find himself on dry land, and to have a comfortable bed to sleep in at night.

"Just think of it," he said—"a delicious, soft, comfortable, *steady* bed again!"

Christina turned away abruptly, and walked up to where every one was assembled, with and without glasses, trying to catch a first glimpse of Malta.

"Come and look through my glasses, Mrs. Stoddart," said Mr. Campbell. "If you see a little gray blur, you will know it is Malta."

"And if you see a little black spot on the gray blur, you'll know it is Stoddart," said Mr. Grant.

Christina was very restless; she could not talk to anybody—not even to Grant.

Once she turned to him abruptly as they stood together.

"I've been thinking about that girl," she said; "haven't you any feeling left for her at all? If you were to meet her now, shouldn't you mind one way or the other?"

"Not if she behaved sensibly. If she didn't, I should mind very much."

Christina gave a little cry of indignation. "That is so like a man!" she said.

"Hang it all, Mrs. Stoddart, that's rather hard," said Mr. Grant; "you asked me a question and I answered."

"I only said you were like a man," said Christina; "there—I can't talk any more. Shall we *never* get to Malta?"

"We'll be in very soon," Grant said, cheerfully; "look how near everything is getting. You can make out Valetta now."

"Oh, I wish it was over!" said Christina.

Somehow that girl with whom Mr. Grant had once been in love, and to whom he was now completely indifferent, stuck in her mind.

In spite of herself, she was getting more nervous every minute.

Presently she went to her cabin to put final touches to her packing, and tie on a veil, so that the wind should not toss her hair before she saw George. She tipped the stewards and stewardess, and had her cabin box and rug strap brought on deck. Then, having nothing else left to do, she amused herself by trying for the fiftieth time to distinguish her own luggage in the pile which had just been brought up from the hold.

When she came back to the hurricane deck the Australia had reached the entrance of the quarantine harbour.

People were beginning to come up in shoregoing costume, and those who were not leaving the ship at Malta were planning expeditions and making up parties.

Mr. Grant came on deck in a very light suit, with a most gorgeous tie and aggressively waxed moustache.

He proceeded to show Christina various points of interest on either side of the harbour.

Captain McLeod came up, quite sociable, in his joy at getting near dry land.

"What are you going to do, Grant?" he said. "Campbell and I are going ashore in the first boat we can get, and straight to Pembroke."

"I haven't packed," said Grant. "I told my servant to come on board and see to my things, so I shall wait."

McLeod turned to Christina. "Nearly there now, Mrs. Stoddart," he said. "I suppose your husband will come to meet you?"

"There are some boats coming off from the Marsamascetto steps," said Grant. "Lend me your glasses a minute, McLeod."

"Where? where?—I can't see," said Christina.

"Hullo! McLeod, I can make out Seton-Kerr, and, I think, Davis, in that boat farthest to the left," said Grant.

The hurricane deck was crowded; people who had glasses were lending them in all directions, and every now and then somebody discovered a friend as they came nearer.

It was quite warm, and the breeze had gone down. The water was a real Mediterranean blue with the sun shining on it, in contrast to the grayness of Valetta and Sliema on either side.

Dozens of little green boats were dotted all over the bay, bright spots on the clear blueness of the water.

"Won't you take the glasses for a minute, Mrs. Stoddart? Can you see him?" said Grant.

Christina could not hold the glasses straight; to her disgust her hands were trembling perceptibly.

"I had better go and see about my belongings," said McLeod; "keep the glasses, Tommy, if you like, so long as you don't leave them behind."

"I'll go and see that my wife's things are brought on deck," said McFerran.

Every one was suddenly full of his or her own business.

Grant moved to put down the glasses, and Christina turned round sharply.

"Oh, *please* don't go!" she said, with a sudden impulse.

He was touched by her forlornness, as well as curious to see how it would all end. "Of course not," he said; "it will be all right, never fear."

"It is ridiculous," said Christina, with a wavering smile, "but I never felt so frightened in my life."

The Australia had stopped altogether now; the boats had come quite close, and the rowers were bargaining with the passengers and disputing with each other, shoving and shouting and cursing in Maltese and English. People on board ship exchanged greetings at the top of their voices with friends in the boats, and a couple of scanty dressed natives were diving for coppers.

The ladder had been let down, and the doctor was on it, report in hand.

Cook's and King's men had come on board, with various other official-looking people, and the passengers were consulting with them and with each other, arranging plans and saying good-bys.

It was a babel of noise and movement.

"Can't you see Stoddart yet?" said Mr. Grant; "he must be there."

"No," said Christina. "Oh, *when* will they come on deck?"

"In a few minutes, when the doctor has given his report. There's a fellow in a boat at the back who doesn't seem to know anybody. Could that be your husband?"

"I don't think so," said Christina, shaking her head; she could scarcely speak.

"Hullo! Campbell and McLeod have got a boat already. That fat chap is Seton-Kerr. How are you, Jimmy?"

McLeod stood up in the boat and raised his cap. Jinks, who had established himself comfortably in the stern, barked joyfully. Christina thought McLeod might have come to say good-by to her; they were not special friends, but still—— She turned with sudden gratitude to Grant, but he was talking to some man who had just come on board.

What had become of George? What was delaying him?

She felt she would have given much to have been able to go quietly to a hotel for the night and not to meet him till the morning, but as this was obviously impossible, she wished he would come at once.

"Kitty!" said a voice behind her.

She turned sharply.

A tall, bearded man, with sloping shoulders, a freckled face, and rather a snub nose, confronted her. He took her hand, and drawing her toward him, kissed her affectionately.

"My dear old Kitty!" he said, "I am charmed to see you."

Christina drew away from him, flushing crimson, and then growing deadly pale; she turned instinctively to Mr. Grant.

But there was only one thing left for him to do, and he did it.

"I can't be of any more use to you, now your husband has found you, can I, Mrs. Stoddart?" he said, and then, raising his cap, he turned away.

Christina felt completely forsaken.

"Who's that chap just come on board?" said Grant to a sailor he knew, who had come to meet his wife.

"Which do you mean? Where?"

"Over there, with that smart-looking girl—very nice girl, too. He doesn't look *quite*—eh?"

"Oh, well, of course not. He's only a fellow called Stoddart—naval engineer. Sound enough chap, but rather bumptious."

"Great Scott!" said Mr. Grant, "that's very odd. She's a 'cute young woman—she always said he was 'in the navy.'"

Then he went to look after his servant and his own affairs, and for the time being forgot Christina and hers.

CHAPTER VI.

"THIS is the drawing room," said George Stoddart, "and the dining room we shall see next. Not a bad flat, is it? And this is Caroline."

Christina was not immensely impressed by any of these pieces of intelligence. The drawing room was really fair-sized and fairly furnished, but to her English eyes it looked very bare, and Caroline was a red-headed, capless Maltese, with a gaping rent down the side of her bodice and a skirt of a different pattern. However, she greeted her future mistress with a beaming smile of welcome, and looked as pleased in her own way as George did in his.

Christina felt herself in a sort of dream. The paddles of the Australia were still going in her head, and everything round her seemed to be swaying up and down.

She was overdone and overexcited, and, though she was not particularly given to tears, it was all she could do to keep from crying, which would, she felt, be a ridiculous climax.

George and she had so much and yet so little to say; they were so near and yet they were such utter strangers. And—was it only his beard which made him seem so totally different from what she had fancied?

She constrained herself to go round the drawing room

and admire his preparations for her reception, to show an interest in a framed photograph of his last ship and a couple of groups of men and officers.

George assured her that his last ship was the finest in the service and the officers the pleasantest lot, but that the Dauntless in both ways was better still; this was a capital flat, in the best part of Valetta; he had got those two arm-chairs an excellent bargain, he had secured the best cook in Malta, and Caroline was a treasure.

Certainly he seemed prepared to take a satisfactory view of things in general.

"We shall have a capital time," he said, cheerfully; "you like going out and so do I, and there will be lots going on. I know plenty of people to introduce you to, and there is a very jolly family, great friends of mine, coming to the flat above us. You are sure to like them, and there is a girl you will be able to go about with when you haven't got me, which won't be oftener than I can help. It has been very hard on us to be separated for so long, and we must make the most of each other now, old girl, mustn't we?"

"Of course," said Christina, stupidly. He was very kind, and she felt herself dull and ungrateful.

It was perfectly idiotic to mind if his voice was a trifle loud; people did not make their own voices, and probably all sailors got used to talking loud. It was only because she was so tired and giddy that everything jarred.

"This is our room," said George. He was not at all embarrassed; had they never been separated for the three and a half years of their marriage his manner could not have been less so, though it might have been less eager.

But Christina flushed red to the roots of her brown hair.

"We have got a nice balcony, looking on to the street; and I think I managed the furniture pretty well—in this room it is only hired, so far. I'm not a bad housekeeper, I tell you, Kitty. What do you think of it all?"

He turned to her, his good-humoured face full of satisfaction and pleasure, and she, with a great effort, laid her hand on his arm in a sort of half caress, and roused herself to speak brightly.

"I think you have taken a great deal of trouble for me, George dear," she said, "and it is only because I am so tired and sleepy that I can't thank you properly—you know that?"

"Of course I do," said he, cheerfully, and he kissed her.

"I will try my very best to be a good wife; I am sure we shall get on well together."

"Why, of course we shall," said George; "my dearest old child, don't worry yourself. I am not at all hard to get on with, and I am sure you are not either."

It was all Christina could do to remain passive under his touch; to be responsive in the smallest degree was more than she could manage just yet.

"You don't think me stiff, I hope?" she said; "I don't want to be; but it is such a long time since I saw you. And, somehow, don't you think we have drifted a bit apart in our letters, though it was hard to help it? Didn't you feel it so?"

She was trying with all her might to bridge over the gulf of strangeness which separated them, and the effort was to her a very apparent one; but George did not seem to notice anything.

He answered her question with a laugh. "I can't say I did. I thought your letters very nice, and I am sorry if mine weren't, but I'm a bad hand at writing. Come, dearest old child, let me take off your hat, and we will go and sit in the drawing room."

Christina had the sensation of having received a very kindly given slap in the face.

"I am so giddy," she said.

"Then you shall rest on the sofa, while I talk to you. What a sweet little woman you look, and what a lot I must make of my wife now I have got her at last! We ought to have a honeymoon, shouldn't we? And instead of that I shall have to be on board ship most of to-morrow morning."

"Oh, must you?"

"I shan't be a minute longer than I can help—you may be sure of that. And I daresay Mrs. White will come in and see you——"

Christina started violently. "Who did you say?"

"The people in the flat above. By the way, they must have come out with you. The Whites—very jolly if you are friends already."

Christina drew herself away from her husband abruptly, and sat down upon the bed. The only thing that suggested itself to her was to scream, and this was obviously undesirable.

"Oh," she said, "I am so tired; I must lie down for a bit."

George was distressed.

"Of course you shall," he said; "I'll stay with you, little woman."

But Christina felt that if he touched her again she would laugh or cry, or do something absurd.

"Oh, please don't!" she pleaded, in a shaking voice. "It is only after being on the sea; I feel so queer and giddy. It is horrid of me, but you won't be offended, will you? If you would leave me alone for a little——"

George looked decidedly disappointed, but he did not say much.

He would leave her for an hour, and then bring her a cup of tea. It was nonsense to say she wanted nothing; she should not be allowed to starve.

She was glad to be alone on any terms.

He insisted on establishing her comfortably on the bed, and Christina felt that a refusal would be peevish and irrational.

But when he left her she started up.

What was she to do? The Whites seemed somehow the last straw.

Could she stand it all?

Wild ideas came to her of escape to the Australia, to be carried away from Malta before George knew. There were people on board who had been very kind to her, but would they be equally kind when she explained that she had run away from her husband—because the Whites were friends of his? She began to laugh. Surely there must be some other reasons, but she could think of none, except that he talked loudly, and had lost a tooth at the left side of his mouth. And his clothes were badly made—there was no doubt about that.

She must make up her mind at once, and Christina never could make up her mind. She had a vague idea that a separation might be possible if she went at once.

She knew she was overstrained and overexcited, and not in a fit condition for judging; everything might look completely different to-morrow morning.

She had often done foolish impulsive things on the spur of the moment, and been very sorry for them afterwards.

But she could not wait till to-morrow morning to decide.

Christina's head became more and more confused. How could she escape even if she wanted to? George would be sure to hear her and meet her in the passage, and she certainly could not tell him she was going away; she had very little money, and all her boxes were in the flat, and she was too tired. Besides, she would probably be very sorry for what she had done when it was too late. What she wanted was a little time, and that she could not have.

Just at present she was too giddy and tired to mind much about anything.

She lay back on the bed, and in five minutes she was dreaming that she was running away with all her strength, and that George and Miss White were pursuing her, while Captain Grant, in a deck chair, which though stationary never seemed to be left behind, was cheering her on. But always George and Miss White were gaining.

Christina was shaking with such abject terror that she woke herself up, and George came in with a tray of hot tea and toast.

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTINA awoke very late next morning.

The shutters were open, and a watery sun was shining in through the French windows; there was a sound of much movement in the street and in the distance she could hear guard being relieved.

She had slept soundly, and awoke feeling fresher and more cheerful.

Christina was a young woman much given to enthusiasms and impulses wise and foolish. She had done many rash things, none rasher than consenting to marry a man on a few weeks' acquaintance, partly because she was dull and chiefly because he wanted it.

She had been quite capable of a very decided step the night before, had not frequent repentance taught her to hesitate before giving way to an impulse which might possibly look quite different a few hours later. She had learned to distrust exceedingly her own hasty judgment.

To leave everything behind her and escape from this stranger who was her husband, and who was not like any man she had ever been accustomed to meet, had seemed to her the one thing possible last night, but she was not surprised to find that her point of view had entirely changed this morning.

She had no choice left—that was a comfort at least.

And she would have no half measures; as she remained with George as his wife she would do her best to make him as happy as she possibly could. She must just concentrate her mind upon her own behaviour to him, and being, as she told herself, a person of one idea at a time, she hoped then to cease to notice the little things in his behaviour to her which had already jarred upon her.

As for the Whites, was she a fool or a snob that she should object seriously to the Whites? They were not very fascinating on first acquaintance, but probably they had all sorts of good qualities. Very likely they had been extremely kind to George, and certainly Mrs. White was most good-natured.

Besides, was not Christina a sworn democrat? Had she not many and many a time insisted on her absolute indifference to birth, and had not even half her friendship for George at the beginning arisen from her indignation at a sneer of her father's?

And her father was wrong—most certainly he was wrong. George might be a trifle unpolished, but that would soon wear off, and as for his clothes, he could get a new suit, and then that would have been easily got over.

Caroline made her appearance by the time Christina had decided that every thing was for the best in this best of all possible worlds; she certainly offered an opportunity for the expenditure of any superfluous reforming energy. She was attired in a dirty red bodice, ending at least an inch before her skirt began, and giving a glimpse of uninviting undergarments, her red hair was wilder than ever, and her beaming face was black with smuts.

The master had gone out, but would be back as soon as he could, and he had ordered her to bring ma'am some tea as soon as she woke.

"Now, a great many men would not have thought of that," said Christina to herself; "it just shows how good he is."

She had her breakfast in bed, and then she got up and dressed, in a resolutely cheerful frame of mind. It was delightful to put on entirely fresh clothes, and throw aside those she had worn on the voyage, which were tumbled and full of salt.

She got out a dark, reddish, tailor-made dress, which suited her colourless, almost sallow face and light-brown hair. She was not pretty, but somehow she always looked well, and she dressed well.

Among home troubles with the Lorimers want of money had been chronic, but it had never prevented them from having everything they wanted, and it would not even have entered Christina's head to hesitate about getting a tailor-made frock when she felt inclined, or to have her evening dresses made anywhere but in Paris.

She was nearly ready when Caroline again poked her head in at the door, without previous ceremony of knocking.

"Somebody come to see ma'am," she said. Her English was plentiful, but not always correct.

For a moment an absurd idea that Mr. Grant might have come to see her flashed hopefully through Christina's head; then she realized its extreme unlikelihood.

"Two lady," said Caroline.

"Well, show them into the drawing room," said Christina; "I shall be ready in a minute."

When she went in she got a slight shock; her visitors

were Mrs. and Miss White, looking more vulgar than ever, now that they were on shore. Mrs. White was very, very fat indeed, quite remarkably fat, and all her dresses looked as if they succeeded in remaining fastened by a miraculous effort, obviously so great an effort that it always made Christina a little anxious. Periodically she had arrived on deck with her placket hole gaping open, and she was fond of sitting with her legs crossed, displaying an alarming amount of fat stocking and flannel petticoat.

Miss White was tall and large-boned, with eyes whose expression Christina thought particularly disagreeable, a large, curved, thick-lipped mouth, and a very pronounced figure. A certain class of men said she was "very good sport; a girl with whom you needn't mind in the least what you said and did."

Mrs. White got up from the sofa with an effort, and came to meet Christina effusively.

"My dear girl, it is delightful to find we shall be almost as near neighbours as we were on the Australia! It is too soon for a call and of course you are not settled, but I couldn't pass your door without coming in. I thought you might be feeling a bit lonely. George is a dear friend of ours, not to say an old flame of Beatrice's"—Beatrice giggled—"but you won't be jealous of that, I hope."

There was much doubtfulness occasionally about Mrs. White's h's, but Christina could stand her better than her daughter, and made her answer as friendly as she could.

"It was very kind of you to come in," she said, "you will think me very lazy when I confess that I am only just up. Wasn't it odd? I was splendidly well all the voyage, and as soon as I got ashore I felt quite seasick!"

"It's better to be ill on board and all right on shore, like Beatrice and me. However, you had a very good time on board, hadn't you?"

"But you needn't be afraid that we shall tell Mr. Stoddart!" said Miss White, with much slyness in her manner.

Christina stiffened promptly.

"Really——" she began and then stopped. What was the use of being annoyed? These people meant to be kind to her, and were George's friends. If this was their idea of light and amusing conversation, it was not their fault.

"He ought to have come to bring you out himself," said Mrs. White.

"Well, his ship recommissioned at Malta, and he was very glad of the chance of being appointed to the Dauntless," said Christina, resolved to be pleasant.

She considered she had succeeded rather too well, when a little later Mrs. White invited her to go out with them. They had nothing to do but to go to the library, and could spend the rest of the morning in showing Mrs. Stoddart the town. They were fortunate in having their flats in the Strada Mezzodi, as they were within a few minutes walk of everything, and in an hour or so could show her a good deal.

But the idea of walking the streets of Valetta in company with Mrs. and Miss White was not alluring, and Christina declined with great promptitude and politeness.

"I think I must wait for George," she said.

"Well, there are dozens of things you must see. Make him take you to the Marsa this afternoon—there's a naval and military football match, and we might meet there and drive up to Valetta together and have tea at Bizzazza's," said Mrs. White. Her suggestion was made good-naturedly, but was perhaps not entirely disinterested.

Many a weary hour had she stood in the dust and wind, with nobody to talk to, and frequently not a chair to sit upon, when Beatrice required her attendance at a football match; if Mrs. Stoddart would enjoy herself, and have the name of chaperon as well, could anything be better or more satisfactory for everybody?

"I dare say we shall pick up some nice fellows at the Marsa, and make up a jolly tea party," she suggested; "and then I'll leave them to you to chaperon, for fat old ladies are only in the way when young people get together."

Christina shuddered.

"Thanks very much," she said, "but I don't know what George's plans may be."

"Now you and George mustn't behave like a newly married couple," said Mrs. White, shaking her head reprovingly. "We won't allow it, will we, Beatrice? And before we go, can I help you with your servants? Are they satisfactory? Would you like to come to market with me

to-morrow? Take my advice, and go to market yourself, if your cook will allow you. He will cheat you well if you don't. Take my word for it, my dear, every Maltese will do his best to cheat you; but I think I am pretty well up to their ways, so come to me whenever I can be of any use."

Christina would have promised anything in her joy at signs of departure on the part of the Whites. If it had not been for many misgivings in her mind, if they had not been George's friends, she would have probably considered them rather curious and amusing.

She went down the passage with them, and at the flat door they said good-by with much friendliness.

"You must come in to-morrow afternoon," said Miss White; "it is Sunday, and lots of fellows always come. The girls here are all so unfriendly, but I hope you and I will get on well."

"They don't like a girl to have more beaus than they have themselves," said Mrs. White, gaily.

"They are angry if their particular man speaks to any other girl," said Miss White. "I am sure I don't know why. I am never jealous if my men amuse themselves with other girls. I always tell them to make themselves as pleasant as they can. Don't you think the same, Mrs. Stoddart?"

Christina felt she could bear no more. In her wildest dreams she had never imagined people quite like the Whites. The doctor's wife and one or two of the farmers she had gone to see at home had been equally uncertain about their h's, and had had accents equally strong, but they had talked little and always been respectful. She had tried again and again to put them at their ease, but evidently, to judge by the Whites, had never succeeded.

Just as the last words seemed to be really coming to an end, there was the click of a latchkey, and George opened the door.

He was in uniform, which suited him better than plain clothes, and Christina looked at him with relief.

The Whites were effusive, so effusive that she was convinced they would return to the drawing room and continue their visit on the smallest hint.

"We have been making friends with your wife," said Mrs. White. "I hope we shall be good neighbours. I have been telling her she mustn't be jealous of Beatrice."

George laughed loudly.

"Oh no, Kitty won't interfere with my old loves!" he said.

Miss White was highly delighted.

"Like your impertinence to call me an old love of yours!" she said.

And then George said she was one indeed, and if he hadn't been married—with a glance at Christina. Whereupon Miss White slapped him, with an equally witty rejoinder, and every one was highly pleased.

Christina listened dumbly, occasionally smiling faintly, and looking and feeling desperately out of place.

Mrs. White, who was by no means unobservant, saw that all was not right, and suddenly summoned her daughter away, confiding to her outside the flat that she was afraid Mrs. Stoddart was a little inclined to be jealous.

"They are very old friends," said George. "Miss White always chaffs me. Very good fun, isn't she?"

He was quite sure the Whites had made the best possible impression upon his wife.

Then came lunch, during which Christina sat opposite to George, realizing that she must sit opposite to him for the rest of her natural life.

He heaped up his plate with meat and vegetables, drank ale audibly, and used his toothpick without concealment. Then he tried to touch her foot with his under the table and she drew away sharply. A moment later she recognised her action as futile and foolish. She must accept gladly, joyfully, any sign of affection, anything that promised to destroy the barrier of strangeness. George and she must live their lives together, and the better they could get on, the more she could cultivate a little blindness, a cheerful, matter-of-fact content, the better for her happiness as well as his.

Besides, Christina had a strong sense of justice. She forced herself to see matters from her husband's point of view; he had received her kindly and affectionately, and done what he could for her, and he had a right to expect

that she on her part should take some trouble to please him.

Luncheon was a decidedly cheerful meal.

Caroline's ideas of laying the table were elementary, and there was a rim of dirt round the pudding plates, which she made a wild effort to wipe off with her apron when it was pointed out to her. The cook came in to the dining room incontinently to explain angrily that he had nothing to do with the plates, which were Caroline's concern.

George said Christina would have to civilize the servants, and they both laughed.

Then they went into the drawing room, and he further explained his brilliant bargains over the furniture, and exhibited his canaries, which could, he declared, do almost anything but speak, and which had been a farewell gift from a sailor on his last ship.

But one mistake he had made: the fireplace could by no means be persuaded to draw, and a fire was impossible.

"But it is not so very cold," said George, contentedly.

Christina did not like to say it was, and refrained from getting a shawl, which had been her first idea.

"We shall have a nice long afternoon," he said; "it is raining, so we can't get out, and I don't mind a bit—do you, old girl?"

"Not a bit," said Christina, cheerfully. "I want to have a talk with you very much."

"That's right," said George; "come and sit down, and we'll have a confab."

Christina avoided his knee, and seated herself on the sofa beside him.

She would soon know whether there was any hope that he and she would ever be closer together.

"George," she began, "I want to tell you something—we mustn't have any secrets. I have had one. I have often tried to tell you, but in the end I thought it better to wait till I saw you."

Christina began her confidences with a great effort. She was naturally outspoken—far too outspoken in fact, but when she wished she could keep silence, and she had proved it by keeping two secrets. One, her marriage to George, had been easy to keep, as it had faded into the background

of her mind during those three years and a half, and only been recalled by the letters, which had become shorter and less frequent as time went on.

The other she had kept for George and had often looked forward to telling him, but she did not look forward to it now. He was very kind, but very unresponsive.

In answer to her he laughed and said, "Well, what is the secret, little one?"

"I want to tell you," said Christina, flushing a little, "and it is ridiculous to feel shy about telling you anything; but somehow, George, I do feel a little shy with you. In reality I know you so little."

"I am sorry for that," said George, putting his arm round her, "you mustn't feel shy with me, young lady. I feel as if I knew my own wife pretty well."

She answered just a little impatiently.

"Oh yes, conventionally," she said; "but it is rather hard for a full-grown man and woman to be dashed at each other's heads as we have been. Of course, we are husband and wife—but I know so little about you."

George was ever so little offended, and evidently considered her completely unreasonable.

"My good girl," he said, "that really isn't my fault. I am sure I have never tried to hide anything about myself from you. I have told you my people aren't much to boast of, and that my relations are rather a shoppy lot on the whole. I should be very sorry for you to think I was ashamed of my relations."

"It is not that in the least!" Christina broke in hastily, "I don't mind what your relations are. What I mean is about you personally. I should like to know everything. Where you were born, where you lived when you were little, what school you went to——"

George burst out laughing.

"What on earth do you want to know that for? Nothing ever happened to me at all exciting, or that could possibly interest you."

Christina gave a short sigh. There was no good beating about the bush any longer, or trying to make George into a fitter mood to receive confidences or herself more inclined to make them. Once, when she was a little girl,

she had in some way offended her governess. Christina had believed herself to be in the right, and had at first obstinately determined not to say she was sorry. But a second day of coldness on the part of her governess had destroyed that resolution; when another evening came and all her efforts for reconciliation were still repulsed, she could bear it no longer.

It had been a very great effort indeed to her, and she had thought of it and dreamt of it, and fancied herself going to her governess and receiving her forgiveness, and feeling that Miss Reeves understood how sorry she was. She was trembling with excitement when she went to the school room, and full of the extreme importance of her mission. Christina could remember quite well how her broken words of repentance and contrition had been received. The governess said it was very easy to say she was sorry, but she must prove it by deeds not words before she could be forgiven.

It gave Christina a sharp pang to remember her repulse even now, and the complete noncomprehension of the effort she had made.

The whole scene flashed into her head as she sat beside George.

Would he have any more comprehension?

"George," she said, flushing, but speaking as lightly as she could, "would you be very much surprised to hear that I write stories?"

He looked at her with affectionate amusement.

"My dear child," he said, "are you going to turn out an authoress on my hands?"

Christina went on hurriedly.

"It is quite true. Ever since I was a little thing I have had fancies, and, as I had nobody to tell them to, I began to write them down as soon as I could write. I never imagined they could be good—I just loved them myself. But after you married me, I began to think better of myself altogether. And one day a fancy came to me and I wrote it down, and it seemed to me really good, and a wild idea came into my head to send it off to a magazine."

Christina remembered with what anxious excitement she had packed up her story and sent it off in secret.

She had told herself she expected nothing, but there were such enormous possibilities! It was *possible* that the editor might write, accepting her story with effusion and begging for more from such a genius. She never allowed herself to recognise this hope, which was in her mind all the same.

But the editor did not do this. Instead, after an interval so long that she became convinced that her manuscript must be requiring much consideration, he sent it back to her, with printed regrets that it was unsuitable for his magazine.

Then Christina, with her faculty for complete temporary discouragement, made no further attempt, neither wrote any other story for more than a year, when she happened to find her old manuscript in a drawer, and it struck her as so unexpectedly good that she determined to try again.

So the little story went off once more, to come back again and again. But Christina was older, she had been through a season in town, and had more or less found her level, and she was not so easily discouraged.

At last it came back, with a few kind words of advice and appreciation instead of the usual printed lines. The idea " was a good one and strongly written in parts, but the grammar and mode of expression were often defective, and the story was an awkward length and broken-backed in construction."

Christina felt a glow of gratitude to her unknown friend; he had taken the trouble to read her story, he had understood her, and he had helped her exceedingly.

On this encouragement she recast her story entirely, she sent it off and it was accepted.

After which she thought all her difficulties were over, and was disappointed to find her next story had to make almost as large a round before it found rest.

Christina was not naturally persevering; she wanted to leap to success, and was always either wildly hopeful or completely discouraged. Many a time she resolved to make no further struggle and write no more, but then came an idea which must be written down, and there was always the hope that her last effort might bring her the sudden

fame she dreamt of, and cause a sensation in the editor's room by way of prelude to a sensation in the world.

Once or twice she had tried to write a long story, but in vain; her mood changed and a new idea came to her after a few chapters had been written.

She had brought a story to show George, her last and also she hoped her strongest, and she had meant to tell him all about her hopes and struggles, but when it came to the point she could not.

He took her youngest and most beloved child from her with such want of reverence, such want even of curiosity, that Christina would have liked to snatch its cherished pages away from him again.

But she did not; she only said with hesitation that she hoped he did not mind her not having told him before, and George said no, he didn't mind that.

"But to tell you the truth, Kitty," he added, "I shouldn't like you to turn out a literary woman."

"Believe me, they don't all neglect their households and wear blue spectacles," said Christina, bitterly.

But she regained her good temper in a moment, and George said he would take the story on board ship with him next afternoon—she must remind him—but just at present he preferred to talk to her.

Christina said that was all right, and was very cheerful indeed, beginning to talk of something else at once.

Later on they had several games of halma, and George showed Christina twenty-one different ways of playing patience.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next day was Sunday.

Christina, who had never had going to church presented to her as anything but an occasional function, would have preferred to spend the morning comfortably at home, but George was so evidently unprepared for this that she did not suggest it.

They went out, and climbed up ladders of steps and waded through white Malta mud, and bore, more or less patiently, a very long service and sermon. Christina had been accustomed to short chanted portions of the Prayer Book, in churches full of flowers and incense. She found the service intensely wearisome, but, discovering that a criticism on the sermon had evidently shocked her husband, she did not venture to say so.

George brought her home by Strada Reale, through a crush of natives out for Sunday, and she was amused and enjoyed it. They walked in the street, by way of getting less elbowed and knocked about, so she could only catch the very slightest glimpses of shop windows, in which she always took an interest.

She saw an officer who had been on the Australia, standing on the steps of the club, and gave him a pleased bow. But George hurried her on.

"That is the club," he said. "I don't think it is very nice for a lady to look in."

Then he took her for ten minutes or so on the barracka, where Christina seated herself in an archway, and looked over the sunny Grand Harbour, with the fleet at anchor, to gray Fort St. Angelo on the other side, and felt, for the first time, a satisfaction with Malta as the place where she must live.

The Dauntless was in dry dock, so George could not point her out, but he told Christina the names of all the other ships, and gave her a little naval information, looking tall and manly in his uniform, and they had a very pleasant ten minutes.

After lunch he went to his ship, and he did not forget to take the story with him; Christina would not have reminded him for worlds.

She began the afternoon happily enough, wondering if Mr. Grant would turn up, but scarcely expecting him, though she realized that a talk with him would be very pleasant.

But when George came back about five, to take her up to the Whites, he had not made his appearance.

Christina felt just a trifle shy about meeting her husband. She flushed a little when he came in, looking very attractive in her unusual timidity.

But George said nothing about the story.

"Are you ready to come upstairs?" he said; "I won't be a second getting out of uniform."

Afterwards, when they came down from the Whites, it was time to dress for dinner.

Christina dressed for dinner as instinctively as she dressed in the morning, and the night before George had dressed too. But to-night when she was ready he appeared without having changed his coat, with a coloured tie, and a pair of slippers very much down at heel.

"I hope you don't want me to dress as if I was going to a dinner party every night?" he said to Christina. "I like to be comfortable in the evenings."

After dinner, when they were once more in the drawing room, he spoke to her abruptly.

"Christina," he said, "I have read that story."

Christina looked at him, a question in her eyes. Then she looked away; he had dropped grease on his coat, and by way of being comfortable had unfastened his waistcoat and put up his slippered feet on the sofa.

"To tell you the truth," he said slowly, "I don't like it at all. I don't like the subject. It is not a lady's subject."

Christina was hurt, and to hide it she answered flippantly.

"My dear George, you are completely out of date!" she said.

Then she looked at him again, and said to herself, how could that man possibly understand? How could she have been such a fool as to show him her story?

"No lady should write on such a subject," said George, trenchantly. Christina did not think she would have felt so jarred if he had said "woman."

"A story dealing with a divorced and guilty woman's career is not one I shall either allow you to read or to write."

"But it is only an episide in her life," said Christina. "It was one of the ideas that came to me and worried me till I wrote it down. Can't you imagine her misery when her daughter grew up, and found out? It seemed to me artistic and strong"

"A lady's writing has no business to be strong," said George. "It shocked me very much indeed, Christina."

"And it does not seem to me that it is any more shocking than plenty of the statues and pictures in the Royal Academy and the Louvre," said Christina, eagerly. "Nobody is shocked because they are so beautiful and so true. Not that I mean," she added, flushing, "that this is beautiful, or perhaps true; but that is what I was thinking of —don't you see what I mean?"

And then she thought to herself impatiently, how could she be such a fool as to talk like this to him?

George did not understand what she was talking about, except that she seemed to him to be avoiding the point.

"But, Christina," he said, "how can you defend what you say on one page near the middle? Something about passion"—he turned over the pages hastily—"which—which I should be very sorry to see printed in a story with my wife's name at the end."

Christina broke in eagerly: "*She* says it—not I—can't you see the difference? By that time she has come to have thoughts of her own and to speak them. Her life, as I represented it, *must* have coarsened her."

George shook his head disapprovingly.

"And yet," he said, "you speak of her at the end—yes, I've got the place—as 'essentially pure-minded and self-sacrificing,' in fact, as a good woman."

"So she was! She had voluntarily wrecked her own life to save Geoffrey, when his wife treated him so badly and he lost the power of his arm. Afterwards all her suffering was for her daughter's sake—she never thought of herself!"

Christina argued eagerly, in defence of a woman who lived to her.

"It is not as if she had had a husband to leave," she urged, "and even then——"

She stopped; by instinct, and even without looking at his face, she recognised that George and she were completely out of touch.

"I am not going to argue the matter with you, old child," he said, disapprovingly but kindly; "I don't like your choice of subjects, and I have told you so."

"I didn't choose," said Christina; "the subjects come to me."

"Well, if subjects like that come to you, you must have an unhealthy mind—that is all that I can say," said George.

Christina laughed. "You may be right there," she said. "I am papa's own daughter, and a spice of wickedness attracts me."

Her earnestness, her honest anxiety to understand him and to make him understand her, was gone; he looked honestly, healthily shocked, and the impulse to tease him was too strong for her.

But his next words made her earnest enough.

"Kitty," he said, "I want you to promise me not to write any more."

Christina jumped up from her chair.

"Oh," she said, "I *can't!* George, you don't know what you are asking."

"I am sure I don't want to vex you," said George. He caught her hand, and drew her down beside him again, rather as if she had been a petulant child. "If you must write, though I would rather you didn't, why not write for children? That is what a lady could do well, I am sure——"

Christina interrupted him with an impatient exclamation.

"Oh, George! I couldn't! Characters are born, and then they must go their own way and say their own say. I couldn't make up my mind what I was going to write about."

"It is not as if you needed to work for your living," said George, "with your money and my pay we are very comfortably off. You are making me very unhappy and anxious."

"Do you think my morals are shaky?" said Christina, with a laugh.

Then she looked at him, and was suddenly seized with compunction.

He looked really puzzled and worried.

"I have no business to tease you, at anyrate," she said; "but don't ask me to promise, George. It will be a great mistake."

Dimly she recognised that as things were he would be very unwise to take from her something that would fill her mind, and make her able to bear much.

"I have a right to ask something," said George. "If we are to be happy together, old girl, I must be able to approve of you thoroughly."

"But what about me? Must I be able to approve of *you* thoroughly?" thought Christina to herself. She wondered, if she asked him, would he in return give up anything? Would he give up "being comfortable" in the evenings and dress for dinner? Would he try to speak and laugh less loudly, and to let her see less of the Whites?

But she would make no conditions; if she must give up what she loved most in the world it should be without conditions.

"My darling little girl," said George, "for my sake, promise me never to write again." He put his arm around her and kissed her.

Christina had had very little love in her life. She thought George exceedingly foolish, but she recognised that he was fond of her and kind to her. Never had he had a better chance of laying the foundation of a good honest affection between them than now, when he was asking for so great a sacrifice.

Christina promised.

He kissed her again. "Thank you, dear," he said. "You have given up a little pleasure for me, and you shall have as much pleasure as I can give you to make up for it."

A little pleasure!

The idea flashed into her head that a good story, with a cynical ending, might be made of their utter noncomprehension.

"We must positively try to get a little firm ground on which we can both stand, between the different worlds we live in," she said, and George looked at her in bewilderment.

Then she drew a little closer to him, laying her cheek against his shoulder and turning white with the effort the caress cost her.

"You'll be very kind to me, George, won't you?" she said. "I have nothing in the world but you."

They had a reconciliation, which was perfectly satisfactory to George.

It was from this day that Christina began dimly to recognise what her life would be like.

She began that week in an enthusiasm of virtue, which for some time prevented her from being annoyed by anything George could say or do, or even unduly disappointed by the collapse of all her dreams of life at Malta. It was such a completely new thing for her to try to think of anybody's happiness but her own, and so contrary to her whole bringing up, that there was a certain fascination in the experiment.

George was exceedingly kind, and did his best for her amusement.

He hated being alone himself, and consequently took pains never to leave Christina alone; if he had to be away he always managed, if possible, to have the Whites to replace him. It was useless for her to declare that if he could not be with her she would infinitely prefer to be by herself.

Her efforts to gently modify him were no more successful. She tried to create a reform in his clothes and to persuade him to shave his beard, but she found him not easy to influence.

He assured her laughingly that if she did not like him with his beard she would like him still less without, and that the brown tail-coat to which she took exception was a particular favourite of his.

Christina was patient, with a patience born of the inward conviction that nothing she could do would make him as she wished him to be.

She was more successful with Caroline's clothes, though she waged a daily battle over caps, which Caroline could not be restrained from tearing off the moment she was out of sight, thereby adorning them with many marks of dirty fingers. Caroline was friendly, not to say familiar, in her manner, and absolutely indifferent to dust and untidiness. If called in to be remonstrated with, she invariably at first drew up a chair beside her mistress, cheerfully prepared to discuss the matter, and very much entertained by her own negligence.

The cook was not much in evidence, except when Caroline and he quarrelled, which was frequently. Christina went to the market once, and was amused, but afterward she found it was too much of a good thing to get up so early, and the cook highly approved of her staying at home. Once or twice she tried to order the dinner, but she knew no Maltese, and he no comprehensible English, so he listened and then arranged the dinner to please himself, and certainly he knew more about it than Christina, to whom food and attendance had hitherto come with as little need of interference on her part as the air she breathed.

But she was active and energetic and enjoyed the change.

She was out nearly all day.

She liked the Strada Reale, where there was always a certain amount of bustle and movement; she liked bargaining at the Indian shops immensely. The Whites liked this, too, when they had not to pay, so it suited everybody except George, who became anxious beyond concealment about the screens and rugs and silver ornaments in which Christina invested, and her utter indifference to bills.

"They won't want to be paid for ages," she said, lightly; "don't you like bills, George? I have been brought up never to pay ready money."

But before ten days had passed she had ceased to care for the Indian shops.

She joined the library. George never opened a book, but she could not exist without some kind of literature, and, besides, the reading rooms were a pleasant lounge.

She persuaded her husband to take a weekly box at the opera. There was only one left, and it turned out to be high up, almost out of sight and hearing, so in the end she would not go there, and preferred to take occasional stalls, which George not unnaturally considered useless extravagance.

She tried to get him to join the Golf Club, and suggested the purchase of a pony, but after one drive with him in a hired dog-cart she withdrew her request.

Before they started Christina had been convinced that the driving of a four-in-hand would be but as child's play to George; when they came back she would have hesitated

to trust herself with him behind a Shetland pony! They narrowly escaped numerous accidents, got jammed in a string of *carrozzes* at the Porte Reale, and collided with a go-cart full of natives at Floriane. Then they met the Tandem Club, and got wound up between the leader and wheeler of the first tandem.

George said angrily that a fellow ought not to be allowed to take out a tandem when he couldn't drive, and at the next narrow escape he lost his temper, and roundly abused the drivers of all *carrozzes* with which he came in contact.

"Those chaps can't drive in the least," he told Christina many times, "their one idea is to gallop straight on as hard as they can, no matter what is in the way."

But henceforth Christina preferred the most recklessly driven *carrozze* to a dog-cart with George.

Nothing had begun as yet in the way of gaiety, and it was too cold for expeditions. They wrote their names at the admiral's and at the palace, one afternoon, and on other days there were generally calls to return, and George loved paying calls.

Christina was thrown entirely upon the society of his friends, and before the end of the first week she had discovered the difference between a lieutenant and an engineer in her Majesty's navy.

George's friends were very kind; they visited her frequently and informally, were anxious to help her in any way they could, and never met her without inviting her to come and see them. It was chiefly real hearty kindness, and if there was a certain satisfaction to them in the knowledge that her father was the son and brother of a marquis, the satisfaction was shared by George, who put himself to some trouble to let everybody casually know the fact.

Christina sometimes hated her visitors one and all with a very thorough hatred; sometimes she found them inexpressibly amusing, had there only been somebody to share her amusement.

CHAPTER IX.

"Up, Jenkins!"

"It wasn't your turn to call at all."

"I am quite sure the sixpence is in Mrs. Stoddart's left hand."

"And I am positive it isn't. I heard a distinct jingle at this end of the table."

The Whites were having an evening party. Their flat had been turned completely upside down for the occasion; the drawing room and dining room had been prepared for the reception of the guests, and Mrs. White's bedroom was arranged for refreshments. Christina had come upstairs to join the festive throng, leaving behind her a flat almost completely destitute of furniture. The Whites had borrowed everything—from the cook to the drawing-room screens and the silver salt-cellars.

Christina had not minded lending; she knew they would have been equally ready to lend in their turn. She did not even mind having to go to their party so much as she had expected.

The evenings with George were so very dull. They played halma or backgammon; sometimes, but not often, she was allowed to read, while George solemnly played patience by himself, calling upon her every now and then to look and admire.

The evenings were the worst part of the day, but the afternoons after dark were bad enough.

Sometimes she felt as if she *could* not keep her promise to George. The fever of writing came upon her, and stories flashed into her head.

But always she stopped herself by the thought that he was so kind to her, and so *good*. It was the thought of his goodness that controlled her. He was so particular about all she said and did, he was so strict in all religious duties, and he was so shocked at laxities of every kind. While he jarred upon her constantly, she felt that she respected his character, and resolutely kept it before her.

But still, life with him was very dull, and this dulness had made the prospect of the Whites' party not so appalling.

Mr. White had stipulated that the evening should begin with cards, rather to the annoyance of his wife and daughter, who considered that it broke up the party; however, they had given in, and, having exacted a promise that after supper they should be free to do as they liked, had arranged to have supper early.

Christina had left her form of amusement to be decided by fate, and had been seized upon by a festive party to play "up, Jenkins."

In the dining room another game was going on.

Miss White was the only girl who was not playing; she had said there were enough without her, and had then retired to the balcony with a handsome Mr. Taylor in the commissariat, who looked like a gentleman.

Two officers, who had come either by mistake or against their will, were lounging against the wall, refusing to play games or to do more than answer if they were addressed. Mrs. White's hospitable soul was distressed about them, and Christina inwardly agreed with George's vehement observation that they ought to be "spanked!"

She wondered if they had heard the remark, as it had floated over to her from the nap-table quite distinctly.

She was by no means enjoying herself madly. She was sitting next a man who stuttered dreadfully, and appeared to think it part of the game that every time their hands went under the table he should seize Christina's in his, which was exceedingly hot and clammy.

She furtively rubbed her fingers now and then with her handkerchief, and was very nearly driven to doing it openly.

The rest of the party consisted of girls with enormous fringes and men in very badly cut evening coats. They talked at the top of their voices, without modulation, and laughed vehemently.

There was a girl opposite Christina in a washed-out muslin, with a narrow blue ribbon sash, and a formation at the back of the skirt, which suggested that it might have been originally worn with a bustle. She wore on her head a wreath of roses, palpably artificial, and had some to match round the front of her dress, which was cut low. Yellow gloves and white satin slippers completed her costume, and

Christina considered her quite the most remarkably dressed girl in the room, and longed to take her and brush her hair, remove her gloves and her roses, and give her a pair of black shoes.

Christina heaved a sigh of relief when Mrs. White announced that games were to stop, and that it was time for supper. She executed a strategic movement which placed a group of people between her and her late neighbour with the stutter.

The nap-players were collecting counters and paying up pennies. George and Mr. White were both a trifle cross; they were the only people who had played in earnest; the others had viewed the game as a huge joke, and had laughed at everything, giggling over their own mistakes and their success or failure.

George was fuming over the last round as he paid out his pennies.

"I certainly ought to have made my four that time," he said, indignantly. "You played according to no rules at all, Mrs. White; the seven of clubs was a most extraordinary card to play when you had the king in your hand! You couldn't tell that Mrs. Williams had the ace."

"It was just a mistake," said Mrs. White, her fat person shaking with laughter, "but it answered very well you must allow, George. Dear, dear, the luck's against you to-day."

Mr. White muttered something about the impossibility of playing with some people. He, too, had been unlucky.

"I am making up for the eightpence I lost the day we played at your house, Mrs. Williams," said Mrs. White; "not a thing could I get the whole evening but sevens and eights—everything under seven had been put out, so I couldn't get anything lower. And the only time I got a decent hand, it was a misdeal!"

Christina shuddered. Were these social parties of frequent occurrence?

George was collecting the cards he had held to prove that he ought to have won his four, which he did, quite satisfactorily to himself, after a good deal of dispute as to what the others had and had not played.

He could hardly be torn away for what Mrs. White called "refreshments."

Christina rejoiced in this break in the evening.

"Up, Jenkins" had merged into "consequences," which was proving an inexhaustible form of amusement, and the girl in the washed-out muslin had just read out, amid shrieks of laughter, that "Mrs. Stoddart" had met "Mr. Taylor" "in the dark." He gave her "a kiss." She gave him "a box on the ears." The consequences were "an elopement," and the world said "they were a couple of fools."

Christina was torn away without difficulty from this exciting pastime.

She chose a seat a little by herself; George's friends did not appreciate her very much; some of them were afraid of her, and some of them thought her dull, though they all admired her.

Next to her was an old lady in a terrible kind of turban with a purple bow in front, who had spread a handkerchief on her knee in preparation, but had as yet only succeeded in securing a glass of lemonade; she was talking of herself as a favoured guest at the palace.

"I don't care to go there on Thursdays when there is a crowd," she said; "what I like is to have a pleasant chat with Lady Smyth all to myself. She is such a delightful person when one knows her intimately——"

A small middy at Christina's elbow, so small and so recently a middy as to be almost a naval cadet, began to favour her with a certain amount of attention.

He found this sort of show, he said, rather a bore, but one had to go. He preferred dinners; one could get a girl to oneself—no other fellows to interfere. But married women were the best fun; they were more up to a joke, and not so easily shocked.

Mrs. White bustled about everywhere, piling up the plates of her guests with chicken and jelly, and really distressed by the insufficiency of their appetites.

"Now, Mrs. Stoddart, you must let me give you a bit more trifle. Now, you must, dear; you have had nothing yet—*nothing*. Maybe, though, you don't fancy the trifle? I made it myself and it should be good, but very likely it

is a different kind of jam you like in it or there isn't enough wine? There's nothing else you could fancy? I *should* have sent down to ask what you liked."

Mrs. White's hospitable soul was so rent that Christina had to hastily profess a keen desire for more trifle.

Miss White, having amused herself during supper by stealing bits of chicken and salad from Mr. Taylor's plate when he was not looking, replacing his glass of whisky and soda by one of lemonade, and similar good jokes, had now again retired into a corner with him, after a faint resistance on his part.

The man with a stutter sang a song remarkably well, and a couple of girls played a duet remarkably badly.

By this time everybody had finished supper and George came to the front for another game.

"Now, good people," he said, "you have all got to play the feather game. Mrs. White, we must have a sheet, if you please."

Somebody suggested an ignorance of the game and an inclination to sit and watch, but George would have no defaulters.

"There is nothing whatever to do, except sit on the floor and blow," he said, impatiently.

"You won't ask me to sit on the floor, George, surely," said Mrs. White. "I might never get up again, and I don't believe the floor would stand it."

But the master of the ceremonies self-constituted was not overcome by her delighted remonstances, and she was half persuaded, half forced, to seat herself on the carpet amid shrieks of merriment.

"Mr. Stoddart is splendid at setting things going," said Mrs. Williams; "it's a great pity he's married; we should have had all the girls setting their caps at him. But you have stolen a march upon them, Mrs. Stoddart."

Mrs. Stoddart did not feel so exhilarated by the compliment as might have been expected.

It was nearly two o'clock before the Stoddarts found themselves at the door of their flat. One game had followed another, and George had enjoyed himself so thoroughly and with such intense excitement over everything,

that Christina had found it impossible to persuade him to make a move.

She had been amused at first, and then increasingly bored. She had not been allowed to sit still and quiet for an instant; George, with the kindest intentions, had insisted that she should play everything.

Now he was in such wild spirits that she felt it would be cruel not to make an effort to be enthusiastic too.

"I enjoyed myself immensely. I don't know when I have spent a jollier evening," he said. "Wouldn't it be a good plan if we were to have something of the same kind? Just a few jolly friendly fellows and nice girls with no nonsense about them."

No nonsense about them, certainly, Christina thought. One girl had had her dress half torn off her back at musical chairs, and had only laughed, and at cat-and-mouse another had had her hair pulled right down and had gone on playing all the same.

"I should have liked a little more singing," she suggested, mildly.

"Oh, I don't know—that is all very well, but I like something lively," said George. "That fellow Smith sings well, doesn't he?"

"Indeed he does," said Christina, "and he talks badly. He can't bear to be silent, and he takes about an hour to say every second word. If I were he, I should sing always. He could easily chant his speeches."

George laughed loudly as he fumbled for his latchkey.

CHAPTER X.

"ARE you ready, Kitty? How smart you look! That brown straw hat with roses suits you down to the ground."

"Quite ready," said Christina. "I have got a very correct sunshade to go with this dress, but on the whole I think it will be safer to take an umbrella."

It was a fine afternoon, and she had put on a very smart

gray and pink dress with a good deal of lace about it, which she had never worn before; she knew her hat was becoming, and she was in excellent spirits.

"I'll go up and tell the Whites," said George.

They were going to the races, and Christina loved races. She was in too good spirits to be depressed by the knowledge that the Whites were going with them. Mr. White, a stout little engineer, could never be persuaded to go anywhere, and George, who was very good-natured, said it would not be so pleasant for the Whites to go without a gentleman, and besides it would be jollier to make a party.

Christina did not even remonstrate.

After her usual fashion she was exhilarated by the thought that something amazingly delightful might happen on this her first introduction to Malta society—why not?

She knew so many people, surely there was a good chance that she might meet some one she had met before. People constantly went out to Malta for the winter.

And then there was Mr. Grant. She had caught a glimpse of him once in a shop in Strada Reale, but he had not seen her, and he had not called, neither invited her to tea on guard, or offered her his pony.

But no doubt he thought it better that they should meet again first, and perhaps that he should be introduced to her husband.

Oh, undoubtedly Christina was going to have a good afternoon.

The Whites appeared, Mrs. White looking prodigious in a black cotton-backed satin, rather the worse for the wear, and a red velvet bonnet. Her daughter had an extremely badly made red dress, with a white, fly-away straw hat, suitable neither to the day nor to the dress, and made to match by the addition of a bit of red ribbon, evidently an afterthought.

Malta *carrozzes* only hold four by courtesy. George sat on the extreme edge of the seat, with his feet on the step, and the others managed as best they could. He and Miss White were very jovial on the way down to the Marsa.

It was not a pretty drive. Christina had already begun to hate the dull half mile between the Porte Reale and the

outer gate, which must be passed to get *anywhere*. Outside the Porte Reale there were rocky, desolate-looking hillocks on one side, with an occasional goat trying to find something to eat, and on the other the Floriane barracks, with an intermittent sort of football going on in the square. A train, sauntering along to the right after the peculiarly easy-going fashion of Malta trains, startled Christina by an incontinent whistle, as she was trying to catch a glimpse of the Grand Harbour round Mrs. White's stout person.

The rest of the way was little else but walls, both before they had rattled through the arch of the outer gate and afterwards.

But there were plenty of carriages to brighten up the road, all full of English people, and all going in the same direction.

There were *carrozzes* full of girls in smart frocks, and others crammed with officers, chiefly in racing kit. There were numerous dogcarts, a few tandems, and an occasional rider, all evidently upon pleasure bent, and Christina's spirits rose momentarily. She had driven down to the Marsa with George one day a week before, and been shown the polo ground, and the football ground, and the inclosure for race meetings, but to-day it looked much more alive.

The stretch of barren land was as desolate as ever, but in the foreground there were carriages innumerable and an inclosure full of people, while Christina could see in the distance the little group of horses at the starting point, and the bright coats of their riders.

There was a crowd already in the grand stand and inclosure, though the second race was only about to start. Punctuality was evidently the fashion, and the first race meeting of the season, combined with a good afternoon, had brought out all Malta.

Christina looked round as they came in for some familiar face, but she saw nobody she knew just at first. There was the inevitable group of men round the fountain in the middle of the inclosure, where they made their bets and had a good view of every newcomer. The Stoddart party had not time to get themselves a place by the railing to see the second race, and indeed nobody but Christina seemed particularly anxious to see it. Instead, George pointed

out everybody he could think of to her: the general, the admiral, the captain of the Dauntless, and various other celebrities.

Then, having done his duty, and having introduced several men to his wife, he went off with Miss White. He was very fond and proud of Christina, but he and she had nothing to say when they were together, and he and Miss White had always plenty of jokes in common. He had got chairs by the railings for both Mrs. White and his wife, but Christina preferred to stand, and waited for the next race, talking languidly to an assistant engineer and a middy from the Dauntless. The engineer was inclined to admire her and exerted himself to be agreeable. He did not know anything about racing, and had been in Malta only a few weeks longer than Christina, but he did his best to give her information nevertheless.

She found by her programme that McLeod was riding in several races, and would have liked to back him as a fellow-traveller, but George had made her promise not to bet.

Christina had been taken to her first race meeting when she was six years old, and had won several sovereigns to spend in sweets and toys, and some tiny pairs of gloves, and though she honestly tried to see from his point of view when he told her that a lady ought not to bet, she could not.

The riders in the second race began to straggle out of the paddock. Her companions pointed out to her one or two naval men, and then came McLeod on a beautiful little chestnut pony, which bucked and reared, half wild with excitement, and completely refused to turn to the starting point. McLeod looked well on horseback; he sat very quiet and at his ease, completely indifferent to the crowded audience before which his pony had chosen to perform. A moment later a groom came up and led the pony gently in the right direction, after which it went off quite quietly.

"Captain McLeod's Nur-el-din, brown, yellow sash and cap," Christina read from her programme. "He's the only man I know riding, and I should *like* to back him with something more substantial than wishes!"

Just at that moment she saw Grant and another man come into the inclosure. They went straight over to the *pari-mutuel*, and he did not see her, but her spirits leaped up. Oh, for half an hour completely away from George and George's friends!

There had been some difficulty over the start; Nur-el-din had persistently declined to get into line; but at last they were off, and for a few minutes Christina forgot all about Grant and George too.

Then Nur-el-din's name shot up on the board opposite the figure 1, and she was pleased. Some man came up and asked her to have tea. Christina supposed he was a friend of George's, but had not yet even made an effort to distinguish one man he introduced to her from another.

She went with him to escape from her engineer, who was growing monotonous, and in the tea tent she came face to face with Grant, who was catering for a couple of very pretty, well-dressed girls.

He returned her smile and raised his cap, but he passed on at once, and Miss White and George came up and joined them, George standing about, looking as if he was patron of the whole race meeting, and making himself loudly agreeable to everybody he knew, after a fashion which unreasonably annoyed his wife.

That was almost all Christina saw of Mr. Grant during the afternoon. She expected him to come and speak to her momentarily at first, then she was surprised, then angry, and at last decided despairingly that this was an omen that she was fated to associate with George's friends, and only George's friends, for the rest of her natural life.

Once, going up the steps of the grand stand, they passed quite near Grant, and George remarked: "I thought you said Grant of the Camerons was a great friend of yours. You haven't seen much of him to-day, have you?"

Christina laughed. "I knew him pretty well," she said, "but we matrons must go to the wall when there is a girl in the case."

"Yes, he does seem to be making the running with Lady Eva Wrench."

"One of the Wrenches, is she?" said Christina. She

knew the name very well, and had often been to stay with a family of Wrench cousins.

How delightful it would be if Grant were to bring up Lady Eva and introduce her, and what an immensity Christina and she could find to talk about! But he had no intention of doing anything of the kind.

Nearly at the end of the afternoon Christina met him and McLeod absolutely face to face, and they both shook hands with her.

"How do you do?" said Mr. Grant at once. "What do you think of Malta? You are lucky to get a day like this for your introduction to the Marsa. This place is considered the deathtrap of Malta."

"I have spent a very pleasant afternoon in it at any-rate," said Christina. "I must congratulate you several times over, Captain McLeod. I always gave you my best wishes in memory of the Australia."

"Well, I must be off," said Grant. "Sorry I haven't been able to call yet, Mrs. Stoddart. I have been awfully busy."

Then they both passed on.

McLeod said, "Have you and Mrs. Stoddart quarrelled, Tommy?"

Grant was astonished. "Great Scott, no!" he said. "I like the girl herself very much, but I don't want to get mixed up with the Man-eater's set. I must go and call some day, I suppose, though it is only a case of ship acquaintance."

"Eh?" said McLeod. "What's that? You'd he happy to meet Mrs. Stoddart again—on the Australia: that sort of thing?"

"She's as smart a girl as any here; but her friends—O Lord! And I can't stand Stoddart's appearance. I must be off; I am going to drive into Valetta with the Wrenches. Shall you be in? I shall be at the club before six, and we might go out to Pembroke together."

"Thanks, no. I am going straight back from here with Seton-Kerr."

Grant went off, and McLeod stood still where he was and looked at Christina.

She was standing by the railing, a little aloof from a

group with George and Miss White in the centre of it, and she looked suddenly very tired and depressed.

The afternoon had been so disappointing, and seemed such a type of what she might expect in future. Would people be different to her now, and would she only be welcome among George's friends? It was positively the first time such an idea had presented itself to her.

McLeod looked at her and then at her husband, and remembering what Grant had told him of her story, he understood pretty well what she was feeling.

Grant had not meant any unkindness; he had simply, as usual, done what for the moment seemed to him pleasantest, and if he had seen Christina admired and sought after, doubtless it would have seemed most pleasant to him to act differently.

But McLeod made up his mind to go and speak to her with a sudden impulse of real pity.

He was not to ride in this last race, and had been meditating going to change his racing kit, but instead he went across to where Christina was standing, with a very friendly look on his grave face.

Hers lighted up in glad welcome of him, in memory of that pleasant voyage, when she had been very happy, and was looking forward to an ideal life with George.

He asked her how she liked Malta by way of opening the conversation, and then he remembered that Grant had said the same thing; but this time Christina's answer burst out with unconventional eagerness.

"I *hate* it!" she said.

"Why," said McLeod; "I thought it was just the place ladies ought to like——"

Christina interrupted him impatiently: "For goodness' sake, don't talk to me about what ladies ought to like! In charity speak to me as if I was a man—or a dog! Swear at me if you want, by way of being realistic!"

McLeod had a pleasant laugh—a *gentleman's* laugh, Christina said to herself with intense satisfaction.

"I frequently talk to men and dogs without swearing at them," he said. "Will you come and have a whisky and soda then, or is it possible you might be content with tea?"

"Oh, yes, thanks!" said Christina; "I have been to

tea twice, but this is the first time I shall enjoy it. Let's go to a table as far away as ever we can—where we can't even *see* the Whites!"

She dimly felt her greeting was quite disproportioned to the extent of her acquaintance with Captain McLeod. She was greeting him not as an individual, but as a class.

When they found a desirable table she seated herself with a long sigh of relief.

"The Whites are on the flat above us. They are my husband's friends, and I have to be civil. Sometimes they set my teeth on edge, and sometimes I don't seem to notice quite so much, and have a horrible idea that if it goes on I shall get like them. Don't you understand?"

McLeod nodded; he never unduly wasted words.

"I know I am ridiculously adaptable. Am I gushing to you? Put it down to Miss White's influence. Is this an ill-natured speech? Put it down to——"

Christina stopped suddenly, and ended in a different tone: "But the foolishness of speaking like this is quite my own. I always say the first thing that comes into my head, and am always sorry when I have said it."

"You make yourself out a sort of moral chameleon," said McLeod, offering her macaroons.

"Well, just at this moment it seems perfectly right and natural to talk to you as if you were my brother, but of course that is only the crooked sort of way I have of looking at things, and by this evening I shall probably be as much astonished at myself as you can be."

"I suppose everybody's point of view changes," said McLeod, "though I can't say mine whisks about as yours seems to do. The only thing to be done is to go straight on as far as one can see."

Then he suddenly became conscious that he was speaking very seriously, and changed the subject by asking what Christina had been doing with herself since coming to Malta.

"I have been walking Strada Reale, having tea with Miss White and 'some fellows,' as we call men in our flats, and going to church in a kind of a barn and listening to the longest service you can imagine. By a wild flight of fancy I can imagine myself beating a drum in the Salva-

tion Army, but never, never, can I see myself going to that church if I could avoid it. You are a Roman Catholic, aren't you?"

McLeod nodded. "Would you like to go to mass at St. John's some day?" he said; "or, I'll tell you what; get your husband to take you to the soldiers' church on the barracka. You would like that I am sure; it is a very hearty service."

"I'll ask George to take me," said Christina. "He's awfully good, you know," she added with sudden compunction. "I have been vilely brought up, and he's trying to reform me. This is the first race meeting I have ever been to in my life without making or losing a little money."

"I must say I don't like a lady to bet," said McLeod, gravely.

Christina looked pleased. "Don't you?" she said. "I am awfully glad you don't. I can't make out why it is worse than for a man myself, but I am very glad you think George is right. I am beginning to find there are such a lot of things George thinks I ought not to do, and all the things I like best," she added with a sigh; "but he is *very* good."

McLeod was sorry for her. By way of present consolation he took her to the paddock and showed her his ponies. Nur-el-din looked perfectly conscious of having distinguished himself; he arched his pretty chestnut neck, and made playful snatches at his master's coat. Tommy III was a stout little iron-gray animal, whose forte lay in the polo field, not on the race course; he could check himself and turn more quickly than any pony in Malta, McLeod explained, and enjoyed polo thoroughly, but he completely declined to exert himself in a race. Bairam, his third pony, was by no means beautiful to look upon, and was chiefly distinguished by a remarkable capacity for kicking and biting and a crooked temper; but his master had a good word for him as well, in praise of his speed and endurance.

Christina was as happy in the paddock as McLeod was, perhaps all the more so for a wild idea which flashed into her head that perhaps George might not consider such an interest in horses fitting for a lady.

They met him as they came back into the inclosure,

bustling about making himself generally useful. He was just insisting, with the kindest intentions, that a whole family of his acquaintance would allow him to call a carriage for them, and not wait for the last race, as their dresses were light and it was growing decidedly chilly. He had almost conquered by dint of perseverance, and strongly against the will of the whole party, who were not feeling in the least cold and wanted to see the race, when he caught sight of McLeod and Christina, and relaxed his efforts.

"I must at least insist on your putting on this cloak of my wife's," they heard him say; "she has a warm dress, and I assure you, Miss Lancey, you don't know how dangerous the wind is here."

Then he came across to the other two, his hat a trifle on one side, his good-natured face very hot and red, and his clothes so very badly made.

He was most civil to McLeod; hoped he would come and see them any afternoon he liked, and then they would settle a day for him to come to lunch or to tea on the Dauntless.

Christina remarked to herself that he had used McLeod's name three times in as many sentences, and that he had been quite unnecessarily cordial. Then she reproved herself for looking out for things to disapprove of instead of trying to shut her eyes.

McLeod thanked him, and Christina felt persuaded he had not the smallest intention of calling.

"I hardly ever come in to Valetta," he said. "I am trying to get our boat team into form, and it takes all I know to get them to practice; and then there's polo and football, and my company is going to begin field training almost immediately."

Then he said good-by, and George remarked he was a nice, gentlemanly chap, and asked if he wasn't the honourable?

"Not that those courtesy titles count for much," he added, loftily.

Christina had a little wonder to herself, as they drove home, if she would have preferred George to be thoroughly wicked and a gentleman, or as he was—quite particularly kind and worthy and contented with himself.

She knew that her mother considered herself most unlucky in her husband, and that her father was thoroughly selfish and without principle; but then they practically lived apart, even during the few months of the year they shared the same house.

She acknowledged to herself that McLeod was a man of the class she had been accustomed to meet, and that George was not. But it was not George's fault that he was not a gentleman, or that she had been fool enough once to mistake him for one; with no justice could this discovery that had been forced upon her be visited on him.

Was she to make the rest of her life purely a sacrifice to him? Was she to try and amalgamate herself with him and his friends, so that in time, perhaps, she too might learn to drop her h's, smack her lips when she was eating, and be content with her lot in life?

Miss White's hard voice broke into her thoughts.

"What a nice fellow McLeod is!" she said. "I wish I had seen him to speak to; I wanted to tell him to come and see us. For that matter, mother might write and ask him to come on Thursday evening. Do you think he would come?"

"I am positively sure he would not," said Christina, sharply—"that is to say, unless you knew him a great deal better on the Australia than I did."

"What happened to your friend Grant?" put in Mrs. White. "He was more for ladies' society."

"Bless me, mother, didn't you see? Why, the whole afternoon he was tied to the apron strings of that Lady Eva Wrench, who doesn't think the rest of the world good enough to speak to—horrid, stuck-up girl!"

"She is exceedingly pretty at any rate," said Christina.

A carriage, full of men she knew, passed at that moment, and distracted Miss White's attention, but her mother remarked in a would-be jocund tone that she supposed it would not be right for Christina to want to talk to other gentlemen while her husband was there, but that if he was sent off to the Levant she hoped he would allow his wife to amuse herself.

George's face fell, and he looked suddenly at Christina.

"I haven't said anything to her about these rumours,"

he said. "I didn't want to vex her when it may all come to nothing. But they *do* talk of sending us to the Levant to relieve the Dreadnought. It's too disgusting. When I was at Malta as a boy, ships used to stay six months or so and settle down comfortably. But now you never know what day you may be told to get ready to start at twenty-four hours' notice for the Lord knows where. But I don't believe they'll send us, Kitty."

Christina answered without looking at him—was it to hide the sudden flash of joy in her eyes?

How stupid she had been not to realize the possibilities of separation in George's profession. Were not ships often away for three years at a time? Had not some man told her that very afternoon that he had spent four years and a half at an Australian station?

CHAPTER XI.

"May I come in?" said McLeod. "I have left the dogs downstairs."

"Andrew, my dear boy, you are very welcome. Come to the fire; I am sure you must be perished. Why, your hands are like ice!"

Andrew McLeod had come to see the one woman in Malta he ever willingly visited. Lady Ruskin was a little, frail old lady, much worn and subdued by a life of constant knocking about, and a very troublesome husband and family. McLeod had a culte for old ladies, and this cousin of his had a gentle voice and soft caressing ways which he found more pleasant than he would have acknowledged to himself.

He had known her more or less all his life, and very well since the regiment had come to Malta. She had a pretty house at Sliema with a veranda and gardens, and he was always welcome there.

Lady Ruskin never sat in the drawing room proper when she was by herself; she said that one small woman felt

lost in a big room, and had selected a little alcove for her own, and curtained it off from the rest of the room. She had her books, her work, and her piano there; she read many novels; she worked a little for her own satisfaction, cushions and chair backs, which were a joy to her while in progress, but which she was always meekly conscious were admired by herself alone. McLeod was the only person who was allowed to see them, or to listen to the songs which she loved to sing with her little thin voice, and in a quaint, old-fashioned style which had once or twice almost made him laugh. He had insisted that his cousin should make him a cushion for his room, had selected favourites from among her songs, and had brought quite a little glow of pleasure and approval into Lady Ruskin's suppressed, colourless life.

She fussed over him now with the most intense satisfaction and pride.

"Don't come too near me," he said; "I am rather muddy; I walked over from Pembroke."

"Why, how tired you must be! Sit down and rest. I suppose you were out rowing all morning, and then to walk all this way! I wish you had ridden."

"I couldn't," said McLeod. "I sent two of the ponies in to Seliba this morning to be fresh for polo to-morrow, and Bairam has managed to kick himself lame in the stable—worse luck. Why, you have got a new rug since I was last here. The house will be gorgeous for Gerty's reception."

"I want to make it comfortable for her, dear child," said Lady Ruskin in her soft, apologetic voice. "Andrew, wouldn't you like something hot? If you would have a cup of tea?"

"On the contrary, I should like something cold if I can have it. I walked in from Pembroke at a good pace. I'll ring, and have some soda water if I may. When does Gerty arrive?"

Lady Ruskin looked distressed; she laid down the bedroom slipper she was crocheting, and looked at McLeod anxiously.

"Of course I shall be very, very glad to have the dear child," she said, "but I would be more content if she would

stay in England this winter. Then if the Phæton goes home to pay off in the spring, we might go to a more healthy station. But Gerty *will* come. You see they talk of drains——"

"I see they do more than talk," said McLeod, "considering they have rooted up the whole road. But that means the drains will be extra good by the time Gerty comes, doesn't it?"

"I hope so, I am sure; but I always think when people go round digging at drains they make them worse. I remember once when I was staying at your father's—was it for a hunt ball, I wonder? At anyrate, I know the hunt balls were almost the best in England, people said. But what I was going to tell you was that there was diphtheria in the house, though whether it was because the drains had just been dug up or because they *ought* to have been dug up, I can't exactly remember. I don't think you took it—in fact, I fancy you weren't born at the time; but your brother was very ill—such a pretty little fellow he was, with such golden curls——"

Lady Ruskin ended dreamily, and was aroused to the present by discovering she had dropped a stitch.

"I remember hearing about it," said McLeod; "they thought he was dead once, and I suppose if they had known what was going to happen they would have *let* him die."

"Andrew, dear!" said Lady Ruskin, in a tone of mild remonstrance to which Andrew was accustomed.

Then, having triumphantly recovered her stitch, she patted him gently on the arm, and asked if he had heard anything about his brother lately.

"I had a letter from the agent last week," said McLeod; "he says he hears Drumesk is much the same."

"And I suppose he will never be any better?"

"Never," said McLeod; "his life seems a very useless misery to himself, doesn't it? When he isn't violent he is wretched, and he always thinks people are insulting him and ill-treating him. He wants to kill himself—wouldn't it be a mercy to let him?—though it doesn't sound well for me to say so."

There was always a bitterness in McLeod's tone when he spoke of his brother. Lady Ruskin could not under-

stand it; she did not believe it possible that he could be bitter toward Drumesk because in a sense he stood in his way. Andrew had plenty of money, and was not supposed to be extravagant.

He loved his old home in Scotland, and it was hard to think that it might never be his. Poor Drumesk was physically as strong a man as his brother, and might outlive him.

But it was impossible to feel anything but pity for such a joyless, shadowed life.

Lady Ruskin had a romantic fancy that the course of Andrew's love affairs might have been interfered with by his position, but this idea had no foundation. She wished very much that he would marry—it was only right that he should, with regard to the title and property.

Not perhaps Gerty—though the idea had often crossed her mind. Gerty was her only daughter, and fond as she was of Andrew, there were reasons which would make her very anxious if she were to be his choice. But if such was to be the result of their meeting often and familiarly in Malta, it might be all for the best.

"I want to ask you a favour, Cousin Amy," said McLeod suddenly, remembering an idea which had come into his head on the way from Pembroke. "A Mrs. Stoddart came out on the P. and O. with me, and I would be forever obliged if you would be kind to her."

Lady Ruskin had a shock.

"A widow, I suppose," she said; "where is she staying? Of course I shall be very glad to do anything I can."

"But you are completely wrong," said McLeod, with a very heart-whole laugh. "She has got a husband, very much alive, upon the contrary."

"But, my dear boy, that is worse——"

"I solemnly assure you that I am not dreaming of falling in love with her, or she with me," said McLeod, tranquilly. "I am very sorry for her, but not with a sorrow that is akin to love. In a short life and a merry one, it's always well to help a lame dog over a stile if you can, and if it isn't too much trouble. Her husband is in the navy—an engineer or something——"

"Not that dreadful Stoddart man who walks about Strada Reale with a pipe in his mouth and his hands in

his pockets, and calls Ruskin 'my dear fellow,' though he is old enough to be his father? My dear boy!"

"I never heard you make such a positively ill-natured speech," said McLeod, with a laugh, "and you have dropped your work. I am sure from your description that that is the very man, and to tell you the truth I am afraid Mrs. Stoddart doesn't think him any more charming than you do. She married him in a hurry when she was almost a child, and he was possibly less strikingly objectionable; then he was in China for years and she never saw him, and now she is repenting at leisure. And she was at school with Gerty."

McLeod knew this would interest Gerty's mother, and it did, but it also had an unexpected effect.

"Now Gerty is coming," Lady Ruskin said, "we must be very particular. The girl may be nice, but think of her husband and her friends!"

"But she can't endure his friends," said McLeod; 'her greatest fear is that she may in time sink to their level if she has no one else to speak to."

Lady Ruskin shook her head doubtfully. "My dear," she said, "I don't want to seem unkind, but perhaps that is the very best thing she could do."

But such was not McLeod's idea.

"You are knocking up against my most dearly loved theory," he said. "I grant you it might he most comfortable for her, but best or even right—no!"

He persevered, partly out of good nature and partly out of obstinacy; if McLeod wanted anything he generally got it.

"Would you mind asking them to dinner?" he said.

"Of course I will, if you like, and if Ruskin does not mind. But if I do, you must come, Andrew, and look after your protégée."

"Oh, I will if you want me," said McLeod. "I am afraid I don't like dinner parties, even here. But I will come if I am asked and if as a reward you will sing me something now. I see My Mother bids me bind my Hair on the piano—please sing it."

And Lady Ruskin agreed, with a little flush of flattered delight.

"If you are sure you really want to hear an old woman like me sing," she said.

McLeod turned over for her, with his thoughts very far away. He scarcely heard the thin, breathless little voice, which broke on the high notes and introduced innumerable old-fashioned shakes and tremulos.

Consequently he was startled when the song came to an abrupt conclusion in the middle of a verse, and awoke to the consciousness that Lord Ruskin had just come into the alcove. Before him his wife never ventured to sing, and received no encouragement to do so.

His jokes and sarcasms on her musical powers caused her the most acute torture, more especially as during the long years of their married life she had never learned to know when he was in jest and when in earnest. She was vaguely conscious that everything she said and did irritated her husband—that, try as she might, she always managed to speak when she ought to have been silent and be silent when she ought to have spoken. She was so blindly nervous when he was present that she was sure to go wrong, and at the same time she was acutely conscious that she was very trying to a naturally irritable man.

Lord Ruskin was a small man, with a red nose and a presence.

Among women he still considered himself irresistible, and he was never so honestly proud and happy as when he had succeeded in completely embarrassing the last girl he had been introduced to by a particularly broad *double-entendre.* He also found much entertainment at times in confounding a mixed company by a choice smoking-room story.

McLeod, who was particularly careful in his speech before women, heartily detested his cousin's husband, and took little pains to hide it.

Lord Ruskin came in, carefully stroking down the few hairs upon which he depended to hide the baldness of his head, and McLeod immediately prepared to go, as was his habit.

"Why, Andrew, you're not off?" Lord Ruskin said. "I can imagine that the delight of listening to my wife's

voice may have unduly detained you, but pray don't let me stop either your pleasure or the music."

Lady Ruskin had got up from the piano, and was nervously poking her work out of sight.

"Thanks," said McLeod, "I must go. I am due in Valetta to dine with a fellow at the club, and to stage manage at a performance at the gymnasium afterward."

"Well, I see my wife has been refreshing you. God help you! Wouldn't she let you have anything stronger than soda water? Come with me, and I'll see if I can't find something a trifle more cheerful."

"Thank you," said McLeod again; "I was hot, and I asked Cousin Amy for soda water. I don't want anything else."

"Nonsense, my good fellow. You are not going out of my house on such cold comfort as that, I can tell you. Really, Amy, you are a wonderful woman, but it is lucky for Andrew he hasn't to depend on your hospitality."

Lady Ruskin never could constrain herself to receive her husband's sneers in silence. She began a disconnected sort of explanation and apology while McLeod was saying good-by to her, and Lord Ruskin cut it short by marching out of the room.

Andrew followed, with a very obstinate expression on his face. Lord Ruskin might take him to his study, but he could not and should not succeed in making him drink anything just then.

CHAPTER XII.

GRANT was on guard.

He had spent rather a dull day. There had been a sirroc in the morning, and he had felt stupid and heavy, and had had to turn out the guard twice in a great hurry for the governor. By chance nobody had turned up all morning, and the papers were very dull.

He knew the pictures on the walls by heart, from the

Nile expedition to the skeletons in the inner room, and he could not drink whisky and soda and smoke cigarettes without certain intervals. He had spent most of the day lounging over the fire in the comfortable guardroom arm-chair, with its one draw-back.

A small Maltese boy, anxious to sell an infallible corn cure, had been his sole visitor. Grant had denied corns, and recommended him to go to Pembroke camp and seek out various of his friends. But the boy had lingered to explain further the infallibility of his ointment, finally suggesting with infinite gravity that if Grant had no use for the cure in the ordinary way it was a capital thing for polishing buttons!

Grant had driven him away with contumely, but now he was rather sorry. It would have been something to do and a novelty if he had set to work to polish the brass buttons of his uniform.

Why in the world hadn't he asked some people to tea? He had always done that before.

He would have asked the Wrenches, but Lady Eva had told him that they were going to pay calls at Sliema. But all the same, he had been an ass not to ask them—they might have managed both.

Surely some of the fellows would turn up.

He went out on the balcony and leaned over the parapet, looking down on the unceasing stream of English and Maltese coming and going in the square.

It was Thursday, and a good many people were going in to the palace opposite to call. Grant would have to dine there, and there was to be a dance afterwards; he knew the Wrenches were friends of the governor's, and wondered if by any chance they might be at the dinner.

The Welsh band was playing in the square, with a crowd of natives standing round. Some groups of English people had come to the roofs and balconies of the neighbouring houses to listen; Grant could see several girls he knew at a window in the Grand Hotel.

He yawned, and wished it was time for dinner, or still better for breakfast next morning.

Then he strolled disconsolately back into the guard-room, and had another whisky and soda.

In the midst of this refreshment, a clatter of footsteps on the stairs filled his heart with joy, and Campbell made his appearance.

"Come and have a drink," said Grant, joyfully; "I know you are a thirsty soul."

Campbell's small, freckled face was not so cheerful as usual.

"I have been doing my duty at the palace," he said. "A lot of fellows are coming round here later. I left McFerran at the club, and—McLeod——"

There was a certain hesitation over the name, and Campbell looked at Grant and stopped.

"Ah—McLeod," said Grant, lighting a cigarette. "Has he said anything to you?"

"Not a syllable. I wish to Heaven I knew what to make of it. I have always thought him one of the soundest chaps I know, and the last fellow in the world to show the white feather."

Campbell spoke in a depressed tone.

"There was no real danger," said Grant. There was always a certain undefined jealousy in his mind toward McLeod, who was so much cleverer and more popular than he was.

Campbell was unconsciously fidgeting with the tassels of Grant's sword, which lay on the table, and he did not answer for a moment.

"I have always thought him a very plucky chap," he said slowly. "Poor Beresford and McFerran, who were up the Nile with him, used to tell of things he had done. And then to bolt from a lot of damned Maltee blackguards——"

"It's a queer place, though, that underground Valetta. What savages those creatures are—hardly human enough to be called savages—and all dancing round with their knives——"

Campbell broke in impatiently: "Don't try to make me believe he funked it! Why, there were the police, and we three—match for any fifty dirty Maltee cowards!"

"There's such a thing as panic I suppose——"

"Rot! Bones wasn't afraid. At first, when the fellows came on, and he got mud on his face and both he and I got

hit by stones, he was ready to give those devils what for, if ever a fellow was. He caught a big brute on the chest and trundled him over like a good one, and then I saw he had hold of another, and next minute——"

"He was off down the street as if the devil was at his heels!" said Grant.

"If I hadn't been there myself, I shouldn't have believed an angel from heaven!" said Campbell, shaking his head.

He was puzzled and troubled, while Grant concealed a certain satisfaction. Campbell would not believe McLeod was a coward; he had been the most anxious of the three to penetrate to underground Valetta and explore it. And the danger had been of the smallest. They had passed through streets full of savage, half-naked creatures, existing, as Grant had said, in a state that was scarcely human, many of whom, according to report, had never in their lives left their hole in the earth to reach daylight or have a breath of pure fresh air. Men, women, and children, who lived as it were in the very centre of civilisation, and yet who had never seen the sea or the sun or the sky.

They had treated the intruders at first with indifference, gazing at them as they passed with eyes of stupid dislike, and scarcely troubling themselves to make way for them in the narrow streets.

Then one creature, moved by a sudden impulse, had raised itself from its seat and thrown a stone, and as by magic the whole street had been in an uproar in an instant. The natives had gathered round, shrieking and mad with excitement, almost before the invaders had realized that anything was wrong; they threw sticks and stones, mud from the street, parts of their scanty garments—anything, in fact, that came to hand. It had been unpleasant and inglorious, but there had been very slight danger, and McLeod had begun by helping to clear the way with more effect than anybody. He had knocked down one man and taken another by the throat, and then—Campbell did not like to think of what had happened next.

He was on detachment at Floriane, and he had had a faint hope that, being at Pembroke with McLeod, Grant

might possibly have had some explanation given him of what seemed impossible to explain.

"The best thing we can do is to keep still tongues in our heads, isn't it?" he said, with a sigh, and Grant said, "Of course."

Campbell reflected, to his consolation, that even if Grant did speak no one would believe the story, especially from a man who was known in the regiment as "Ananias," and was popularly supposed to be incapable of speaking the truth, even when he wanted to.

Three or four men who put in an appearance just then, and necessarily changed the conversation, were rather a relief.

A little later McLeod and McFerran turned up, the former with a selection of dogs at his heels and looking as imperturbable as ever.

Then visitors began to arrive from all directions—from the palace, from the club, from a football match, and from nowhere in particular, and they were all very cheerful.

Campbell did not know whether it was by accident or design that a little later McLeod and he found themselves alone together on the balcony. A couple of men who had been with them had gone, others were over the fire in the guardroom, and Grant himself had just had to rush downstairs to turn out the guard at sunset.

An awkward silence fell between the two on the balcony.

Campbell thought to himself, "I wish he would explain."

But how could he explain? The fact remained—he had bolted, and left the other two in the lurch.

"If it had been Tommy Grant I shouldn't have been so dumfoundered," thought Campbell to himself.

In the square the band had stopped playing and were packing up their instruments, while the stationary crowd round them had suddenly become full of motion. The noise of many footsteps and the hum of voices came up to them blended together in one sound, and just below there was a clatter of bayonets as Grant inspected the guard. Through all sounds came the jangle of the perpetual church bells of Valetta, which Campbell had not been long enough in Malta to ignore.

They got upon his nerves in the dusk, and he felt that if McLeod did not speak soon he must.

Suddenly McLeod turned round; he had been leaning forward with his elbows on the parapet and his back almost toward Campbell.

"Jorrocks," he said.

Campbell was at the other end of the balcony, striking a match on his boot; he looked up with a start, and dropped his cigarette.

"Look here, old chap," said McLeod, twisting his moustache; "I don't care a hang what Grant thinks, but I wish you would believe I didn't funk it yesterday."

Campbell began to protest eagerly. "I didn't—I couldn't," but McLeod interrupted him.

"Of course, that's what it looks like—and upon my soul, I don't know how you are to believe anything else—but I would be awfully obliged if you'd take my word for it."

"Of course I will," said Campbell, and then Grant came to the guardroom door and called to them to come in. He had just come up and was unbuckling his sword.

So whether McLeod would have further explained himself had he had the chance, neither he nor Campbell ever knew.

If he had, it might have made a difference in the lives of several people.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THIS is something like a bank-holiday crowd, Mrs. Stoddart, isn't it?" said Miss White.

"If it is going to be another squash like the admiral's, I shall go straight home," said Christina.

They met in the cloakroom at the club, where Christina had been trying to dispose of her wraps for the last ten minutes. She had started from the Strada Mezzodi, determined for this one evening to enjoy herself and trouble about nothing, and already she was a little discouraged.

Among all these people she seemed to be the one outsider. They all knew each other and exchanged greetings and occasional remarks, and she among them all knew nobody —nobody except the Whites.

Her first dance in Malta had been a disappointment. She had gone to the admiral's full of expectation, and had found herself in a mixed crowd, such as at home she had always avoided. There had been no room to move anywhere, and dancing had been a sort of struggle on a drugget in a cloud of white dust. George had agreed with her that it was not good enough, and they had gone home early.

Since then, at night as she lay in bed, Christina had often heard faint sounds of a band when the windows at the admiral's were open, and knew that, outsiders having been disposed of in a crowd, other people were amusing themselves.

At an exceedingly jovial card party at the Whites last night somebody had said that there was a dinner party and a dance at the admiral's, and the window had been opened to listen to the band, amid a general chorus of declarations that they were all much happier where they were.

To the club dances everybody went; Christina would have a chance of finding out if she was to be beyond the pale for the rest of her life—if she would be driven to sit still or to dance thankfully with such of George's friends as were kind enough to ask her.

Was Mr. Grant's conduct to be a sample of what she was to expect now, or was Captain McLeod's?

Miss White by a free use of her elbows had managed to make her way to a glass, and was carefully arranging her black mass of fringe to her satisfaction; she was no more anxious to waste her precious moments upon talking to a girl than Christina was desirous to talk to her.

She rejoined her mother, who was patiently waiting by the door, with her stout person very much in everybody's way, and they went out together.

Christina gave up all idea of reaching the glass, and was content to get rid of her cloak and join George on the stairs.

At the head of the stairs there was yet another crowd to press through—a crowd of second lieutenants and middies this time, eager to be first in the field, and keeping a sharp lookout for their prey.

A little further on Christina caught her first glimpse of the dancing room, and her fears of an impassable squash were set at rest.

"Yes, there'll be room to dance," she said to herself, "if there is anybody to dance with, for me."

She had never been nervous at a dance before, and her anxiety brought a faint colour to her cheeks, and altogether improved her.

Mr. Grant, who was making his way across the room with a programme for Lady Eva Wrench, met her eyes and bowed, finding her pretty for the second time in his acquaintance with her. Prettier perhaps just then than even Lady Eva, who was considered a London beauty. But belonging to such a dreadful set, and with such a dreadful husband!

"Mrs. Stoddart, may I have the pleasure?"

Mr. Campbell had come up just behind Christina, gorgeous in his kilt, which made him look so different from her remembrance of him in blue serge on the Australia that for a moment she scarcely recognised him.

"You can," she said, "certainly."

He was nice to talk to, she knew, though he looked small, very small to dance with.

"Do you know many people?" he said. "Would you care for me to introduce anybody? I see some of our fellows are here—Grant of course you know, but McFerran, or Seton-Kerr——"

Christina did not tell Mr. Campbell how grateful she was, or that the pleasure of her evening was due to a very careless piece of good nature on his part.

It meant in fact escape for the time from George's friends, if not from George, and Christina, realizing this, began to enjoy herself fully.

McFerran and Seton-Kerr both danced well, and both introduced one or two other men. Christina would not allow herself to realize that it was men alone that she was getting to know, and that Mr. McFerran's wife would have

been a more useful and satisfactory introduction than Mr. McFerran.

After the first dance Grant came up, looking very handsome in his uniform, and very well aware of his own value; his hair was carefully parted exactly in the middle, his moustache was waxed into an exact half circle, and there was a whiff of scent as he took out his programme.

Christina remembered from the Australia that he danced beautifully; if he had not looked quite so confident, quite so oblivious of any cause for offence on her part, she might have been tempted to forget his shortcomings for the physical pleasure of a dance on a perfect floor with a perfect partner.

As it was, she received him with great civility, instantly gave him a dance, and when the time came with equal promptitude threw him over.

Altogether it was a good evening, and there was just one *contretemps* during the Lancers.

Christina was sitting out with Mr. Seton-Kerr, and they had established themselves near the dais at the upper end of the room, where they had a good view of everybody. Then Mr. Seton-Kerr, being anxious to be agreeable and exceedingly rash, began to amuse his partner by remarks upon the various sets, and quite unconsciously got into trouble at once.

"Awfully rowdy lot those people over to the left," he said. "See that girl with the nigger's fringe and the flounce torn off her dress? I know her well by sight, and we call her the Man-eater. Did you ever see such a couple of wild idiots as she and her partner look?"

Christina turned in the right direction with a misgiving, and saw what she had expected to see—George and Miss White, very hot and very dishevelled, romping vigorously and very happily through the Lancers.

"Her partner is a fellow from the Dauntless—an awful cad," Mr. Seton-Kerr proceeded gaily; "that set is all naval engineers and that class of people—they really shouldn't be allowed to come to these dances. Just look out for them when they go round after the chain; one of the engineer's wives had her wrist broken in the scramble last year, and they generally knock somebody down."

Of course Christina ought to have stopped him long before, but her presence of mind had deserted her. Now, in charity both to him and to herself, she thought it best merely to change the subject; but she was sorry she had not spoken out when the dance ended and George came across to her, and addressed her by her Christian name.

However, this was the only unpleasant moment in the evening, and on the whole George was at his best.

He danced well, and he looked better in uniform than in evening dress; he was very attentive to Christina and proud of her.

She said to herself vehemently, and to one or two of her partners as occasion offered, that sailors were completely different from soldiers, and indeed from all other men; they looked at everything from a point of view of their own, and they had a manner of their own. It was right to realize this in judging George.

After supper came her dance with Mr. Campbell, who was in the best of good spirits, and insisted on giving her champagne, though she was anxious to decline, being under the impression that he had had quite sufficient already. Then he took her to sit out half way downstairs, and on the stairs they met McLeod in mess jacket and trews.

Christina had not seen him except to bow to since the day of the races, and all at once they seemed quite as much strangers as if their friendly hour together had never been. McLeod had a particularly high collar on and the affectation in his manner which had annoyed Christina on the Australia.

"Why, Captain McLeod," she said, "surely *you* aren't at the dance?"

"Rather not," said McLeod; "I've been dining at the Welsh mess."

He looked very tall and powerful as he stood beside little Mr. Campbell, very much, too, as if, after his old fashion, he was not attending to what he was saying.

"McLeod is too old for club dances," Mr. Campbell interposed; "only subalterns go out in Malta, Mrs. Stoddart. I shall have to drop it when I get my company. Besides, I regret to say, Tommy is getting a trifle thin on the top."

"I am quite content to look through from the billiard room," said McLeod, calmly; "there's an excellent view from there, and more to be seen than you good people know. I have been watching Ananias and a lady who shall be nameless having a high time of it."

"It's very kind of us to let you into the secret of the billiard-room view," said Campbell to Christina.

"Oh, I know all about it," said Christina. "I am intimately acquainted with a middy about three feet high, who knows everything and is steeped in wickedness of every description!"

"Personally I don't consider it safe for a well-brought up and simple youth like myself to associate with middies," said Campbell; "they know too much."

Here McLeod, who had been to all appearance wrapped in meditation, suddenly woke up and said he must be off.

"I'll go home with you," said Campbell, "if you will wait half an hour or so. Tell us what you saw from the billiard room. Mrs. Stoddart is dying to know all about Ananias—sweet youth."

"I know what your half hours mean," said McLeod. "Good-night, Mrs. Stoddart."

As an afterthought Mr. Campbell called down into the hall to ask for Jinks, but McLeod did not hear.

"He's got all possible side on to-night," said Christina, lazily watching him put on his coat and cap and light a cigarette in the hall below, and Campbell seemed to think it necessary to explain, as he would not have done but for the vague soreness between him and the man he liked best in the regiment.

"He's awfully cut up about that little fox terrier of his," he said, rather lamely. "A big brute belonging to one of the sergeants half killed it yesterday. A great friend of McLeod's gave the dog to him when it was a puppy—a fellow called Beresford; he's dead now."

"I must tell you about our tragedy this afternoon," said Christina, and just then George came down the stairs and joined them.

"Well, Kitty, are you ready to come home?" he said.

Christina wished that just for once he would speak to her without using her name, but she would have minded

nothing else if he had not looked so *hot*. It was not his fault, but he did so often look hot; even his hair was tossed and damp, and his collar was completely disorganized and had doubled itself up into limp folds.

With a sudden movement of annoyance she half turned her back upon him.

"I was just going to tell Mr. Campbell about our tragedy this afternoon," she said.

"Oh, tell him, certainly," said George, imperturbably.

"You must know," said Christina, "that if Captain McLeod is fond of dogs, *we* are devoted to canaries."

"Oh now, Kit, I am afraid you aren't," said George, interrupting her in all good faith.

"Well, at anyrate, I know my duty," said Christina, "and as there was a gleam of sunshine this afternoon, I was very careful to hang the canaries' cages out on the balcony before I went up to the library. When I came back I found the whole of Strada Mezzodi in an uproar. There was a thick crowd of natives, and a few P. and O. passengers —even the sentinel had stopped to look on—and all this was opposite the door of our flat!"

"She knows how to tell a story, doesn't she?" said George, with a pleased pride for which Christina could have gladly shaken him.

"As I came near, I saw the flag lieutenant in full uniform in the centre of it all; he was shaking his head gravely. 'That's the flat,' he said, pointing up to ours, and then he added something about 'quite dead.' I was convinced it must at least be George——"

"Don't keep me in suspense," Mr. Campbell interrupted.

"And after all it was nothing but the canary——" began George.

"Blown down and fainted," said Christina, so sharply that Campbell said to himself she was perhaps regretting it was not her husband. But George himself saw nothing.

"Well, I hope the canary is better," said Campbell.

"Much, thank you," said Christina; "the flag lieutenant and I gave it sal volatile and held salts to its beak and it recovered; but it has done nothing but sit on its perch and shake ever since."

"Shock to its system, I am afraid," said Campbell, wisely. "Well, I hear the next dance beginning, and I must be off, for I am engaged to somebody or other. May I call and inquire for the invalid to-morrow?"

There was no further excuse for delaying the end of this evening and postponing being alone with George.

Christina went to the cloakroom, and when she came back George fastened her long, loose wrap round her neck, and she did not draw away from him, though his hands were damp and clammy.

Then they walked home together in the moonlight, and Mr. Seton-Kerr's words kept coming into her head the whole way: "He's an awful cad—an awful cad."

She tried to convince herself that the words did not mean so much. Had not somebody—she could not at that moment remember who—used just the very same words to describe Mr. Grant, with all his perfumes and airs? And Mr. Grant was certainly a gentleman.

"Your little friend with the freckles looked as if he had been punishing the champagne," said George, and that was all that either of them said on the way home.

Then when they had climbed the stairs to their flat and George had unlocked the door, Christina went straight to her room. If it was only possible for her to shut out all sight and sound and memory of George till morning came, she felt anything would have been bearable.

But a few minutes later he burst into the room impetuously, scarcely waiting to knock and allowing no pause for an answer to his knock.

"I say, Kitty!" he exclaimed, "this is something like! Here's an invitation to dinner from the Ruskins. I told you they meant something when they came to call. Why, we shall meet all the swells in Malta!"

"A great deal more likely to meet all the engineers," said Christina, sharply; "it is sure to be a big duty dinner."

At which George's face fell so completely that she was sorry.

"It is not in the smallest degree Lord Ruskin's duty to ask me to dinner," he said, shortly.

Christina herself would have been pleased if his exultation had not spoilt it all.

Perhaps her marriage was not going to make such a difference—perhaps it was only to his wife that George seemed so impossible. Other people might not notice all the little things that jarred upon her.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I MUST say, I am anxious about this evening," said Lady Ruskin.

"You always are," said her husband, in the ill-humoured tone he kept for her alone. "May I beg of you to behave like a rational being and not like a nervous fool."

Lady Ruskin was too much accustomed to this kind of speech to be particularly affected by it.

She fluttered about the room, rearranging the shade of the big standing lamp, pushing a cushion into place, altering the position of an ornament here and there, while Lord Ruskin, from his position by the fire, followed with his eyes more and more impatiently.

"For God's sake, Amy, sit down!" he burst out at last, so violently that she started, and let a China vase fall from her hands to the floor.

"There! I told you so! Some people are born idiots," said Lord Ruskin, muttering the end of his sentence to himself, but not so low as to prevent his wife hearing it.

With years he had grown into such a dislike for her that everything she said and did irritated him, and Lady Ruskin, being dimly aware of the fact, was even more nervous and more tactless than usual in his presence.

She had been very shy all her life, and had never grown out of it, though her lines had always lain in society. She was a woman of warm but narrow affections, and she took very little interest in the outside world, or indeed in anybody beyond her immediate family.

She knew, too, she was at her worst as a hostess, and that

everything she said and did was watched and certainly commented on afterwards by her husband, even if he spared her a sneer at the time, which he seldom did.

A dinner party was to her a much-dreaded ordeal, an occasion on which she knew something was sure to displease her husband—either the dinner or her dress or behaviour was sure to be wrong.

"Captain McLeod, Mr. Grant."

The wisdom of silence Lady Ruskin did not possess, and the interruption was probably fortunate for her.

McLeod and Grant had driven over from Pembroke together, chiefly because it seemed absurd that they should not, but they were not on particularly cordial terms.

McLeod looked depressed and grave; Grant was gorgeous, from his embroidered silk socks to the buttonhole of parma violets Lady Eva Wrench had presented to him that afternoon.

Almost immediately afterwards came the Wrenches—Lady Eva and her brother and his wife—and Grant was instantly engrossed, just as he had once been with Christina Stoddart.

He had eyes for nobody but Lady Eva, and Lord Ruskin, having arranged that she should sit next him during dinner, was quite content to leave her to Grant for the present, and do his duty as host elsewhere. He was an excellent host, though in the end he always managed to secure the prettiest woman in the room for his own entertainment.

"Mr. and Mrs. Stoddart."

George did not enter a room well; he was a trifle too anxious to show that he was entirely unembarrassed.

Lady Eva said to Grant:

"Who is that awfully bumptious creature, and what possessed that girl to marry him?"

"It's a very romantic tale," said Grant, and thereupon proceeded to give in full Christina's foolish confidence on the Australia.

Lady Eva was lazily interested.

"And she told you all that? You must be very intimate."

"I assure you I had no idea we were till she began to confide in me," said Grant, complacently.

"That's a very smart dress," said Lady Eva. "Do you remark how promptly Lord Ruskin had spotted her—the old wretch."

Grant *had* remarked it, and, added to Lady Eva's interest, the fact reawakened his own.

While some late arrival was being greeted, he crossed the room and spoke to Christina with something of his old tone.

"We haven't had a talk for a long time," he said.

Christina looked him full in the face, and laughed ever so little.

Then she turned to Lord Ruskin, who was beginning gently to try and discover how much it would take to shock her.

Grant was piqued, and was not sorry to find he was told off to take her in to dinner, though he had expected Lady Eva to be his fate.

But Lady Ruskin was not enlightened as to the flirtations of the outside world, and purposely arranged that McLeod should take in Lady Eva Wrench.

Success did not crown her efforts. Lady Eva found Lord Ruskin much more amusing than McLeod, and enjoyed his *risqué* speeches and low-voiced stories to the full. McLeod, finding nothing to say, either to her or to his left-hand neighbour, proceeded to eat his dinner in calm and unembarrassed silence.

Grant asked softly why did Mrs. Stoddart forget old friends, and Christina, finding that they were thrown upon each other's society for the next hour or two, and that Grant was good to look upon and had a certain physical attraction for her, would have found the time pleasant enough had not anxiety about George genuinely distracted her attention.

If he had only been on the same side of the table as she was—if she could have only avoided seeing him so restlessly civil, so completely familiar in his manner—she thought she could have borne to hear his voice and his laugh above all the rest. As it was, it was not till after dinner that she began to enjoy herself—after dinner, when George was out

of sight and she could almost succeed in forgetting his existence.

Lady Eva Wrench was very cordial, and in five minutes she and Christina found half a dozen mutual acquaintances. They had lots to talk about, and many little anecdotes to relate of their mutual friends. For half an hour it was almost as if George Stoddart had never existed, and then the men appeared.

Lady Eva and Christina had established themselves on a sofa, half in shade and half lighted by the tall standing lamp; it threw a pinkish and very becoming shadow, and Lady Eva had been brought up never to neglect effects. Christina was younger and fresher, and did not mind; besides, she had not the reputation of a beauty to live up to.

The men straggled in, some half sheepishly, as if apologizing for their appearance, some looking confident of bringing joy with them.

There was Lord Ruskin, with his gouty limp, his waistcoat meeting with difficulty over his stout little person, and his small sensual eyes taking a rapid and comprehensive survey of the room as he came in; there was Grant, looking pleased with himself and all the world besides, and blissfully confident of the pleasure his arrival must bring; there was McLeod, with his thoughts to all appearance miles away, and an air of complete indifference to all things. Among the last to come in was George Stoddart, talking to another naval man as he came, and looking, Christina could not help seeing, indefinably different from everybody else.

In the general half pause which followed, a tall sailor came up to where Lady Eva and she were sitting, and began to talk commonplaces.

Lord Ruskin had gone instinctively to plant himself in front of the fire, and George followed him.

Christina, as she talked, saw her husband draw up a chair for himself and throw himself back in it, his hands in his pockets and both legs stretched out to their fullest extent. He certainly looked exceedingly comfortable.

She could catch bits of conversation.

"My dear Lord Ruskin, it is quite a mistake I assure you. I know for a fact that the Phæton won't be out of dock for six weeks."

"Oh, well, of course if you know more about my ship than I do——"

"And, Lady Ruskin, you must come to tea with me on board the Dauntless—you really must. Christina"—George raised his voice—"shall we not be delighted to see Lady Ruskin, if she will fix her own day?"

People had not yet settled down to conversations of their own, and his words fell on silence—everybody was listening.

Christina flushed.

"I am sure Lady Ruskin must be very tired of going to tea on board ship," she said, hastily.

George looked hurt.

"My wife is afraid you will only think it a bother," he said, apologetically; "but now really, Lady Ruskin, won't you give us the pleasure of your company some afternoon?"

Lady Ruskin, dragged out of a difficult conversation with one of the great ladies of Malta, looked a trifle dismayed, and it was McLeod who came to the rescue, wakening up suddenly and to all appearance accidentally. He crossed to the fireplace and began to talk to George, apparently quite unconscious that he was interrupting, and thereby saving him from a repulse which Christina at any-rate would have felt.

Christina could not be sure whether he had been moved by accident or design, but in either case felt grateful.

Later on in the evening, after he had played, and Grant and one or two other people had sung, McLeod came over to where she was sitting.

"Campbell says you have half promised to ride with him," he began, twisting his red moustache. "Would you care for a mount? I think Tommy III would carry a lady very well."

Christina was grateful, but ever so little piqued as well; McLeod had three ponies, but though he proffered her one to ride he did not proffer his own society. It was decidedly good-natured, but scarcely flattering.

"Get Campbell to take you out to Civita Vecchia," he suggested; "it is a good ride, and I am sure Seton-Kerr will be delighted to give you tea—he's on detachment out there."

"So you are inviting me to tea with one man as well as to ride with another," said Christina, laughing.

Then, as he seemed to consider an answer to this speech unnecessary, she began in a lower tone:

"I wish you would tell me what has moved Mr. Grant to be so very civil to-night."

McLeod had been standing beside her, but he sat down now on the seat which Lady Eva had left to go to the piano a few minutes before.

"Do you remember," he said, "we talked of human chameleons? Well he's one."

"He wouldn't make a good friend then?" said Christina.

"Grant never was friends with a woman in his life," said McLeod, bluntly. "It's my opinion—I give it to you for what it's worth—that platonic friendship is a delusion and a snare. I am as lonely a fellow as far as relations go as possible, and I have lots of men friends, but I have never ventured to make friends with a woman."

Christina had never heard him make so long a speech in her acquaintance with him. He interested her, though the interest did not seem to be reciprocal, and she did not want to let the conversation drop, which she knew was at any moment possible with him.

"Haven't you many relations?" she said. "I have just a father and mother, and they are both offended with me, and for that matter I don't think they ever cared very much about me—not as other people's fathers and mothers seem to care, at least. It's funny, too, don't you think, for there was only me."

"We are both pretty solitary people, then," said McLeod. "Practically my nearest relations are the Ruskins, and they are only second cousins. And you know your existence is not of very vital importance to second cousins, however friendly they may be."

Christina shook her head.

"So we ought to get on well together," said McLeod, still playing with his moustache.

"But of course you would be afraid to risk friendship," said Christina, "for my sake or yours?"

"It is foolish to run any risks," said McLeod, quite

gravely; then he raised his brown eyes and looked straight at Christina, soberly, reflectively, and without any embarrassment.

"I think we should be pretty safe," he said.

She began to laugh.

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not," she said.

McLeod made no answer; a moment later he asked her if she was going to the garrison concert next Saturday.

Then some one gave signs of departure and there was a general movement. Christina's thoughts were completely engrossed with a successful endeavour to get George out of the house without letting him remember his unanswered invitation to Lady Ruskin.

But he remembered as they walked through Sliema in the moonlight to the steam ferry.

"Rather slow, wasn't it?" he said, yawning capaciously; "but, my dear Kitty, why didn't you back me up when I asked Lady Ruskin to tea? It was very awkward for me, and she was quite offended."

Christina did not answer just at once; she was inwardly feeling that with all her strength she hated George. If she spoke, should she be able to prevent herself from breaking out and telling him so?

"Do you hear me, Kitty?" he said, pulling at her cloak.

"I don't think she was offended by me," said Christina, with an effort.

George was very placable.

"She's a nice old lady," he said, "and he's a first-rate sailor, and a rascally old scamp on shore."

"He's a trifle coarse, certainly."

"He's an old scoundrel. He has a grown-up daughter, and yet he runs after every pretty girl he meets. He keeps a woman out here, too, and makes no secret of it."

"Does he?" said Christina.

"I think a married man who does deserves to be thrashed," said George, with energy.

"You wouldn't?"

He coloured hotly in the moonlight, and dropped her hand.

"My dear Kitty," he said, "you should be more careful how you speak."

"No, George, I believe you are the very best man I ever knew," said Christina, earnestly.

"I must believe him good," she told herself anxiously, "it is the only way I can stand him."

Then they reached the steam ferry, and had a few minutes to wait on the wooden platform with some other people.

When they got on board the steam tug, George secured himself a seat near Lady Eva Wrench, more to his gratification than to hers.

It was a satisfaction to him to call her by her name, though there were only a few Maltese to be impressed.

That was a foible natural to his birth and education, Christina said to herself. Was she not large-minded enough to overlook such small things for the sake of his goodness?

And he was very kind, if a little officious. It was he who secured a carriage for the Wrenches at the top of the Marsamuscetto steps, though perhaps it might have been just as well if he had left it to Lord Francis.

George and Christina had a great many more steps to climb before they reached the Strada Mezzodi, and about half way up Christina, who hated steps, paused for breath, and George made a remark which took her much aback.

"Kitty," he said, "didn't I hear Lady Eva ask us to tea to-morrow?"

Christina was dismayed; she was quite sure he had been neither asked nor intended to come.

"She's a very nice girl," said George; "we must certainly go."

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTINA was leaning over the balcony looking down on Strada Mezzodi.

It was rather an amusing post at the beginning of the afternoon, and she had nothing at all to do till George came in.

There was a riding party trying to start from the Great Britain Hotel. She could see two or three girls come out in habits, and several men, but evidently either a horse or a rider was missing, for they were on the lookout, and every now and then one or other of the men walked into the middle of the road to see if anything was in sight.

The admiral's carriage had been waiting at his door for the last twenty minutes, and he himself had just gone out to ride on a very substantial steed.

There came the flag lieutenant in a desperate hurry, and still in uniform. He looked up at Christina and gave her a smile and a salute; they had been great friends ever since the episode of the canary. But Christina remembered that George objected to her being seen on the balcony, and considered it too conspicuous, so she drew back a little.

A couple of men passed, evidently on calling intent, and officers apparently, for the sentinel at the admiral's saluted. He was a Cameron Highlander, an industrious recruit, and he was devoting all his time to a study of the regulations on his board. But as Christina watched him, he suddenly brightened up and put away his board; he had caught sight before she did of the three Irish Rifles who were coming to relieve him.

Christina wondered if during the whole two hours he had been looking forward to the time when he would be relieved; probably, as he studied the regulations so carefully, he was in hopes of being a corporal or even a sergeant some day, and having such a hope before him he was more fortunate than she was.

She had not had a very long apprenticeship at thinking of other people and not of herself, and consequently her thoughts generally veered round to herself and her own troubles.

Who would think of them if she did not? To whom in the world, as Captain McLeod had said of himself last night, was her existence of any vital importance? Nobody in Malta troubled very much about her—why should they? She was not of vast importance, even to George. He was kind, but he was certainly not in love with her, and, on the whole, she fancied Miss White would have made him a wife more to his taste.

Christina liked to be first; she knew she could never be happy or even content with a position in the background, from which there was no hope of delivering herself.

She had ambitioned for herself at different stages of life a genius for singing, for acting, for drawing, for writing.

Once she had taken her courage in her hands, and gone to a celebrated teacher of singing for his verdict. In glees and choruses at school her voice had been praised, and she had never publicly tried to sing alone; but why might not her voice be worth much? Why not she as well as anybody else? Was her voice contralto, mezzo or soprano? —she did not know. She had heard of one or two great singers who combined two or three in the compass of their voices—why not she? Would her hearer be astonished, enraptured, when he heard her sing? Would he leap to his feet and tell her so?

All these wild fancies had come to her, nevertheless when the singer gave his verdict, she accepted it without demur or doubt. But to be able to give pleasure, in time and with much practice, to a drawing-room audience did not seem to her worth striving for. She never wished to sing again. As she could not have the best, she would have nothing.

It was the same now; if she could not take the position she wished for in Malta society, she would prefer to keep clear of it altogether—if George would let her.

Without him she knew very well she could easily make a place for herself, but she was not prepared to throw him aside.

Social success had been very little trouble to her until now. She had had her writing, and all the hopes, fears, and happiness it brought to fill her mind, but now George had taken away that ambition, and given her nothing in its place.

There came Mr. Taylor with a dogcart, and he stopped just underneath the balcony. He was evidently going to take Miss White for a drive. Christina could hear her shout something to him from overhead, and he waved his whip in reply.

Well, the summit of Miss White's ambition was easily attained—she would be perfectly happy driving through Valetta with a good-looking young man by her side. Gossip said that she paid for the dogcarts.

The flag lieutenant came down the admiral's steps still in a great hurry; he was in plain clothes now—how quickly he had changed! What was the summit of his ambition? Christina wondered. He had probably some hope before him, and she had none.

In a story, what would be the end of it? Most people would kill George, she thought, and marry her again—yes, they would be sure to marry her—to—she did not know of anybody she would be particularly anxious to see in George's place; but oh! to be free—to be like other girls!

But George had not the smallest intention of dying, and the Dauntless was not likely to be wrecked on the way to the Levant. Poor George! she did not want him to die, and, besides, it would be a commonplace, inartistic ending.

If only they had been contented with an engagement like other people, and not been such utter fools as to marry. Then they would probably have agreed to part long ago—comfortably, and with no tragedy about it.

Now she must choose between the society of her equals and George. Was he worth the sacrifice?

Then she remembered his long three years and a half of waiting and hoping for her. How often he had told her how he longed for a home, with her as a centre to it; how much trouble he had taken to have everything of the best for her according to his lights!

No, he should not be disappointed. He was very good, and there was something noble about him, she felt sure, which would make up for everything—if she could only discover it.

But her sacrifice seemed a trifle unappreciated. It was evident that he believed her to have everything her soul could desire.

He would never understand her in the least: was she strong enough to live her whole life completely alone?

George and some other man came up the street together, and paused to say good-by at the corner of one of the side streets. George saw her on the balcony, and waved

his hand to her. It was a small thing, but at that moment it annoyed her that it did not occur to him to raise his cap.

How common he looked, and how virtuous, and how pleased with himself! In a few minutes more he would be in the drawing room, and she would have to go in and meet him, and probably he would put his arm round her and call her his dearest old child, and kiss her, and she must submit to the touch of his rough cheek and his curly brown beard—why did men ever grow beards?

Supposing a child came to her: would that complete her life and make her fond of her husband? Christina shuddered at the idea. The child would be hers, but it would be his, too—perhaps like him. She was better as she was, she said to herself; it would not add to her happiness to be the mother of a little vulgar boy, or girl, as the case might be. She laughed to herself a little, but not very cheerfully.

Then she left the balcony, and went into the drawing room to meet and endure George's kiss and greeting.

"Why, Kitty, aren't you ready?" was his first exclamation.

"What for?"

Christina had hoped against hope that Lady Eva's invitation had been forgotten, but in a moment she saw that her hope was vain.

"I don't think I shall go," she said.

George looked at her with consternation.

"Good heavens!" he said, "why not? Of course we must go."

"It is hardly worth while; let us go for a walk instead. She hasn't called, you know."

George gave an impatient exclamation.

"Nonsense!" he said. "It is absurd for one girl to be so stiff with another. My dear old child, don't be silly. Go and put on your blue dress and your corn-flower hat."

"If I go at all," said Christina, "I shall put on a sailor hat, and go as I am—in a coat and blouse."

But a little later she yielded completely, with more than half-contemptuous kindness. Was it worth disputing about? Did it matter whether they went or stayed at

home, and whether she wore a blouse and skirt or a dark blue silk dress, which was too good for the occasion?

They walked to Morrell's hotel together, going round by Strada Reale, as Christina wanted to pay a bill at Hoskins'. So they did not talk at all, as Strada Reale on an afternoon was not conducive to conversation.

They bought a buttonhole for George at the first flower-seller's green wooden shanty, and then he evidently thought that the finishing touch had been put to his appearance, and that he was a husband to be proud of. He wore his favourite brown tail-coat; Christina had ceased to fight against it.

The Wrenches had got rather a large private room, and by various additions of their own to the furniture had succeeded in making it very comfortable.

There were a couple of screens, with big gold birds stalking about on them, plenty of embroideries and silver ornaments, and they had hired a piano.

A good many framed photographs hung on the walls and stood on the tables, and the chimneypiece was strewn with premature Christmas cards, one, conspicuously placed, from Grant, being a photograph of all the Cameron officers in full dress.

There were not more than a dozen people in the room, and they were all evidently fairly intimate.

Lady Eva had not asked George, nor had she meant him to come, and she had no scruple whatever in showing it.

She received Christina very cordially, introducing her to the men she was talking to and bringing her into the conversation at once, and she half turned her back upon George.

"I was in the room when the old general just ordered him out like a child of six, and Frank went without a word," she said, taking up her conversation where she had dropped it; then she added to Christina, "I am talking of my cousin, Frank Wrench—you know him, I think?"

"Oh, yes," said Christina, "I do. And I have stayed at the Leslies while he was A. D. C. He used to have an awful time."

"Did he?" said Lady Eva. "I was only there one night to dinner, when the general told him to leave the

room before twenty people, because he was too noisy or something."

"He didn't mind the general half so much as Mrs. Leslie," said Christina, eagerly; "she used to make him stand in front of her with a tray to catch the ends of her cigarettes, and if she had girls in the house she used to send him about with them as if he were a footman. I remember once she sent him to early service at St. Barnabas' with a girl, and I never saw a man in such an evil temper. He read his Prayer Book hard the whole time, and never knelt or stood up or took any notice of the service. It can't have done him much good."

Christina had forgotten all about George, and in imagination was back in St. Barnabas', with Frank Wrench's cross face in front of her, but she was immediately recalled to the present.

"I shouldn't have stood it!" George broke in to the conversation.

Lady Eva turned round, and stared at him for half a minute; she vouchsafed him no further notice.

"The last straw was having to dance attendance on some male tame cat of Mrs. Leslie's, wasn't it?" she said, again addressing herself to Christina; "more cigarette ends to pick up, or something equivalent."

George pushed his chair a little forward.

"My idea is," he said, "always show you won't be put upon. Now Lord This or That would find it very hard to snub me!"

"I don't doubt it!" said Lady Eva, with emphasis.

One or two men laughed, and Lady Francis Wrench put up her long-handled eyeglass and had a good look at George.

Christina was furious, if he was not; her gray eyes flashed, and a little colour came into her pale cheeks.

Lady Eva got up and turned to her.

"Will you have another cup of tea?" she said; "because, if not, I want to introduce you to Lady Enderby —of course you know her by name."

"No," said Christina, resolutely, but with some lack of truth.

He must feel, she thought, the line Lady Eva was try-

ing to draw between husband and wife, but she would show him that she was not going to desert him.

Lady Eva said "Indeed?" and shrugged her shoulders; then she turned to Mr. Grant, and asked him where he had put his banjo.

George jumped up, anxious to be obliging as usual.

"Let me be of some use?" he said.

"Thanks," said Lady Eva; "I couldn't *think* of troubling you."

"It's no trouble at all, I assure you, Lady Eva," said George. "I'm ready for anything from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter."

He was not to be beaten or discouraged.

Lady Eva said in a low tone to Grant, as he tuned his banjo, "If we took that worthy man by the shoulders and turned him out of the room he might begin to fancy we weren't absolutely cordial, but anything short of that is useless."

"Hang it all! you often call me conceited," said Grant, "but what wouldn't I give to be comfortably panoplied in conceit like that—no chink in his armour!"

Christina crossed the room to say good-by.

Lady Eva received her with marked civility. She hoped to see her any afternoon she could come in, and she would certainly call in the Strada Mezzodi some day that week. Would Mrs. Stoddart dine and go to the opera next Monday?

Christina hastily declined, trembling lest George should hear the invitation, and not unnaturally imagine that it included both of them.

As it was, he said in a hasty whisper, "Ask her to dinner or something, old child."

Christina shook her head very decidedly.

As they left the hotel he reproved her.

"Old girl, I am afraid you are inhospitable. We might have had a jolly little dinner party. I like Lady Eva. She's a little shy certainly——"

Shy! Ye gods!

She restrained herself from telling him that if he liked Lady Eva, the liking was not mutual.

"My dear George," she said, impatiently, "the Wrenches

consider themselves much too heavy swells for you and me. And Lady Eva is going to marry a man who is the next thing to royalty."

"But, after all, it is better to marry the man you are fond of, isn't it?" said George, taking her hand and giving it an affectionate squeeze.

They were going straight home, through quiet streets of steps, where there were only Maltese to be seen.

How very ugly George looked!

"Lady Eva couldn't marry the man she was fond of, as it happened," Christina said; "it was some man in the army, and he turned out to be her brother—under the rose of course. At least, so people say."

"My dear Kitty, you have a collection of the most startling tales!"

"Well," said Christina, "I thought of working that into a story, but then I was afraid it was too unpleasant a subject. I might have got into difficulties——"

"I am glad you had that much saving grace at anyrate," said George. He frowned; any mention of her writing annoyed him, and she knew it. She hastily changed the conversation.

"Do you know," she said, "they once wanted me to marry Franch Wrench—Lady Eva's cousin. He didn't want it particularly, I fancy, but his people did, and mine."

George laughed; he was not jealous.

"Are you sorry you couldn't, old child?" he said.

"Dreadfully!" said Christina. She knew George would take it as a joke, and it was a satisfaction to speak the whole truth for once.

"You wouldn't think it, but I was once proposed to by a girl, and a very nice one, too," said George, complacently.

"Not a very nice one, I should think," said Christina. "Look, George, at those lovely green dragons and frogs in that shop. Do let us go and buy some."

"Well, she wanted me to marry her all the same. You don't seem very much interested."

"I am a great deal more interested in those frogs," said Christina.

She had brought George to a full stop in the street, opposite the quaint little shop.

"And you don't want to know about it all?" said he, reproachfully.

"No," said Christina, "I don't. I have no doubt she cried, and said she was miserable at home, and that she could not bear to part with you—so many men tell you that story. I am sure most of them imagine half and invent the rest."

George was somewhat hurt.

"I assure you it is perfectly true," he said.

"I daresay. And a pretty good snub I should give any other man who said as much to me. Come and ask the price of this frog, or I shall say something rude in another minute," said Christina, hastily.

And the words which were repeating themselves in her head, and which seemed to have come there of their own volition, were two very unpleasant ones indeed, which would have undoubtedly penetrated to George's understanding had they been said: they were, "Fatuous fool!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE only satisfaction open to Christina as the result of that unsatisfactory tea party was the discovery that in some irrational way Miss White had taken upon herself to be thoroughly annoyed thereby.

The Whites had a habit of making their appearance at all hours of the day and night, encouraged by George —a practice which Christina considered very objectionable.

That evening she had established herself very comfortably over the stove which did duty for a fireplace; she had brought home rather an interesting book from the library, and she had intended to spend a happy evening.

George had gone round to the club, after much persuasion from Christina, to attend a lottery there, in preparation for the races on the 24th.

He had been most unwilling to leave his wife alone, but she had at last persuaded him that it might be done without unkindness.

Indeed it cost her some time and trouble to corrupt him into a belief that he took any interest in either racing or lotteries. He was inclined to think that he disapproved of both till she judiciously insinuated that all "smart" people thought differently.

It was her first attempt at management, and she was surprised and pleased to see how well it had succeeded, and at the same time a little ashamed of herself.

But it was delightful to look forward to a whole long evening alone with a book.

Consequently it was with the reverse of satisfaction that she recognised Miss White's shrill voice at the door of the flat in converse with the cook—even Caroline had by permission gone out for the evening.

Christina frowned impatiently; would she never be alone again in her life?

She scarcely turned round to greet her unwelcome visitor.

Miss White was arrayed as for out of doors, in a cloak and a Tam o' Shanter, and Christina discontentedly hoped that this was the sign of a short visit.

She knew Miss White did not like her, that she was jealous of her, and indignant at being held at arm's length. She was quite sharp enough, if George was not, to see that his friends were not Christina's, and she resented the fact. She announced frequently, if vaguely, to her mother and friends that she was not going to stand it. She was quite as good as Mrs. Stoddart, with all her stuck-up airs, and she would tell her so some day.

She planted herself between Christina and the light, with a slight greeting.

"Well," she said, "so you have been to a swell tea party this afternoon. I do think you might have taken me, if you had been in the least good-natured—you knew I was alone all afternoon."

"But you weren't asked," said Christina, mildly.

"What does that matter for afternoon tea? I know *I* couldn't go out and leave a girl all alone in the house. Why,

the minute mother heard you were by yourself this evening she said I must go down."

Christina sighed.

"I didn't know you minded being alone so much," she said. "I don't."

"I have another crow to pluck with you as well as that," said Miss White.

"Hadn't you better sit down, then," suggested Christina, "and get it over?"

It always fidgeted her to talk to anybody who was standing over her.

"The other night in your box at the opera you talked to Eddy Taylor the whole time," said Miss White, "though you knew I wanted to."

"Great Scott!" said Christina, "I assure you I never thought of it! For that matter, he bored me to extinction."

She was thinking what very large, coarse hands Miss White had, and what a large girl she was altogether, and how extremely uninteresting.

"I can tell you I gave it to Taylor afterward!"

"You—*gave it*—to Mr. Taylor for not talking to you? What a capital way of doing things! Now, I should never have thought of it. I hoped he apologized in dust and ashes?"

Miss White was quite conscious that there was a contemptuous ring in Christina's voice, and at any other time she would have resented it. But just then she could not afford to be rude to her, and she already regretted what she had said.

"Well now," she said, "I don't mean to offend you, Mrs. Stoddart. I have wanted all along to be friends, but I suppose we are not good enough for you."

"What nonsense!"

"You mustn't mind what I say," Miss White went on. "What I came down for really was to ask you to put on a cloak, and come up on the roof with me. The moonlight is glorious."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Christina, hastily; "it would be fearfully cold on the roof, and I do hate all those stairs."

Miss White's face fell.

"Well, you needn't be so unfriendly," she said, reproach-

fully; "there are just us two girls living so close together. I was so glad at first, but now——"

"It is not unfriendliness really," said Christina; "it's the stairs and the cold."

"But for this once," said Miss White, eagerly, "for ever such a short time! Do let me get your cloak for you, and say you will come."

Perhaps Christina was ever so little flattered by Miss White's extreme desire for her society. Besides, she was anxious to show that she did not consider herself too good for George's friends.

"If you really want me to go up for a few minutes," she said, "of course that is different. I'll get a cloak in a minute."

It was decidedly cold weather for the roof. Christina got a fur cloak, and twisted a shawl round her head and neck, and Miss White followed her about, anxiously hastening her proceedings.

"The moon won't run away," said Christina on the stairs.

Miss White giggled and said nothing, but the eagerness in her manner had decidedly increased.

They reached to the top of the stairs, and pushed open the door leading to the roof, to be met by a flood of moonlight, which was dazzling, after the semi darkness on the way up.

"Why, there is somebody up here already," said Christina.

Miss White again giggled.

"It's all right," she said, holding fast by Christina's cloak; "I expect it is only Mr. Taylor and another fellow."

Two uniforms emerged out of the shadow of a tall chimney pot.

Christina drew back toward the doorway, and felt she had been made a fool of.

"Is that you, Miss White?" said a tentative voice.

"Hush!" said Miss White, quickly. "Did you come up quietly? Is it all right?"

"A watchdog couldn't have heard us—eh, Benson? You know Mr. Benson? I ordered my servant to bring round supper from the club in about half an hour."

"Ripping!" said Miss White, clapping her hands; "you have met Mrs. Stoddart? Mr. Benson—Mrs. Stoddart. You see I have brought a chaperon all right."

Christina had listened to everything in complete silence. The whole festivity had evidently been prearranged, and evidently, too, Miss White was faintly uneasy as to the success of her deception.

Christina heard Mr. Taylor say to her half aside, "Is it all right about the old couple?" And the answer was, "Oh, yes; they think I am spending the evening safe enough with Mrs. Stoddart."

"I hope they won't take it into their heads to go and see!" said Mr. Taylor, with a laugh.

Christina realized how completely she had been made a convenience of.

"What shall we do to amuse ourselves?" said Miss White, in a would-be sprightly tone. She was evidently very happy, and Christina could see quite plainly that Mr. Taylor was holding her hand.

"I am going downstairs," Christina said.

Miss White was overwhelmed with consternation. She said hurriedly that Mrs. Stoddart must do nothing of the kind; she couldn't be so ill-natured. It was all right when she was there as chaperon, and it would be great fun. And to end the discussion she moved off with Mr. Taylor in a great hurry.

"We'll have a game of hide and seek," she said; "we will hide, and when Eddy whistles, you and Mr. Benson must come and look for us."

Then both of them vanished into the darkness.

Mr. Benson had not as yet opened his lips. Now he turned to Christina.

"Come and let us get a comfortable seat to wait for them," he said, in a rather thick young voice. "I daresay they would rather we weren't in too great a hurry about looking for them."

"I don't want to sit down, thank you," said Christina, calmly, "and I am certainly not going to break my neck over chimney pots looking for them."

"Then," said Mr. Benson, still more thickly, and evidently rising to what he considered his duty at the expense

of some embarrassment, "let us make ourselves as comfortable as we can. You don't mind smoke, do you?"

With which he incontinently tried to put his arm round Christina's waist, a measure which she defeated by placing the doorway between them.

"Don't, please," said she, very mildly; "I mean it, you know, though I don't blame you in the least. I *quite* see your point of view."

"Eh?" said Mr. Benson, a little puzzled.

"I know you only wish to be civil," said Christina, "and to do what is expected."

Her companion stared at her open-mouthed. He could have understood it had she received his advances with willingness or with anger, but her present attitude was too much for him.

She began again: "It's very obliging of you, I am sure, to come here to play gooseberry to Mr. Taylor, and to make yourself agreeable, in the only way you understand, to a married woman you don't even know by sight——"

Mr. Benson broke in: "I assure you I have often seen you, and—a—a—I am awfully smitten, I can tell you. Come out into the moonlight and let me see you now."

He was very young, indeed—young, with round cheeks and a stout little figure, and at the present moment he was a little husky as to voice and a trifle unsteady on his short legs.

There was nothing to be angry with this boy about, even if he had been worth anger, Christina said to herself. Naturally he thought she knew all about this precious escapade, and he had evidently been told off to make love to her in a mild way, without much idea how to set about it.

But the episode was crude, bad form, and a trifle vulgar.

"My good boy," she said, "you have made a mistake. Let me advise you, under the circumstances, to go home to bed, which is what I am going to do without delay. Will you be so good as to tell the others? Good-night."

With which she turned away, leaving Mr. Benson in speechless consternation in the middle of a flood of moonlight.

She hoped the incident would close there. A quarrel with Miss White would be unnecessary and stupid. She

preferred to go to bed and leave everything to be understood.

But Miss White was not of the same opinion. Ten minutes later, as Christina was putting out the lamps in the drawing room, she appeared breathlessly.

"I say," she cried, "whatever's the matter? How could you be so mean as to leave me in the lurch like that?"

"I am going to bed," said Christina.

"But what in the world do you mean? Eddy Taylor has ordered supper from the club, and it will be the greatest lark. I assure you Mr. Benson is a very nice fellow, and the greatest fun."

Christina smiled a little to herself.

"But still, I might almost have been told what was going on and allowed to choose my own companion."

"Gracious! is that it?" exclaimed Miss White, triumphantly. "Well, if I had only known! Just come back this once, like a dear, and next time——"

If nothing but plain speaking would content Miss White, if she could not understand anything else, plain speaking she should have.

"Look here," Christina interrupted, "you are older than I am, so I am not going to give you advice—in fact, for all I know, your proceedings may be all right and quite the fashion in—your—class, but they aren't in mine."

"Well, of all the rude speeches——"

"I don't in the least want to make a quarrel of it. I think myself it would be much better if we were to say no more about it."

"But what am I to do?" said Miss White, plaintively. "I can't go back without you; and Mr. Taylor has ordered supper——"

"Why not go and tell them the whole plan has fallen through owing to my perversity?" suggested Christina. "Do you mind my turning out this lamp? I am really very sleepy."

Miss White was almost in tears.

"What on earth am I to do?" she cried. "Where's the harm? Why can't you be good-natured?"

"Look here," said Christina, raking out the fire in the stove; "I suppose you want to marry Mr. Taylor? Well, I shouldn't fancy you were setting the right way about it. If you really want advice, I should think you might quite well leave Mr. Taylor and Mr. Benson to eat the supper themselves, and to enjoy the freshness of the night as long as seems to them good. They'll probably go back to barracks before old Pietro locks up the house, and, if not, they will easily find his bed under the stairs. Under no circumstances am I going anywhere but to bed."

Then Miss White descended to entreaties. Just for this once would not Mrs. Stoddart help her?—she would never, never ask her again—she would be grateful to her for ever! And when she had brought Christina to pity her and almost to waver, she suddenly lost her temper.

She said with a sneer that Mrs. Stoddart was "mighty particular—more particular than her husband was; many a moonlight party had he joined."

"I daresay," said Christina, calmly, "George likes to amuse himself naturally. But he is a good man and a good husband—very different from those drunken boys upstairs."

"He's no better than the rest of them," said Miss White, passionately.

Christina drew herself up.

"Indeed he is," she said. "Other men may neglect their wives or are unfaithful to them, but he—he is very particular in all he does, and he deserves that I should be very particular too."

There came a great gleam of dislike into Miss White's big eyes.

She was not naturally an ill-natured girl, but if it was in her power by words to humble the pride of the girl before her, or in any way to give her pain, in the passion of that moment she was eager and glad to do it.

"You needn't look at me as if I were the dirt beneath your feet!" she cried. "You think George Stoddart is a paragon, do you? You have heard nothing about his little household in China, I daresay?"

"What do you mean?"

The hot blood leaped into Christina's cheeks, and she

took a half step towards the other girl, with such anger in her eyes that Miss White involuntarily drew back. She was a little frightened at what she had said.

"What do you mean?" Christina repeated.

"What I say," answered Miss White, rather sulkily. "George is a very decent fellow, but no better than the rest. I am sure I like him very much, but he certainly *had* a Chinese family—everybody knows it."

"You will please to leave the flat and go up to your friends," said Christina, sternly.

CHAPTER XVII.

When Miss White had gone, Christina went to her room, and began to undress mechanically.

She took off her dress, and put on her blue flannel dressing gown. She took down her long brown hair, and began to brush it out; but the brush went more and more slowly, and presently it stopped altogether, and she leaned forward, with her elbows on the dressing table and a puzzled frown wrinkling up her forehead.

All her ideas were upset.

She had thought George so good, so honourable, so unnecessarily strict in his ideas. He had spoken so severely of Lord Ruskin, and of any lapse of virtue in man or woman. She had believed in him fully. Was it because he was so different in his ways and manners from any other men she had ever met that she had believed him different in everything? Her conviction that he was what she called "good" had given her courage to stand by him, to bear with him even when he most jarred upon her, and now that it was gone —what had she left?

"He ought not to have married me like that—it was wicked of him to marry me like that when I did not know what I was doing!" she said to herself, passionately; "it was selfish—it was unmanly. And what a fool I was—what a fool!"

It was the first time she had admitted to herself clearly that George had done her a wrong.

She pushed her hair back from her face, and tried to think it all out clearly. She must be just. Was there any hurt vanity in her anger? If so, it must not make her judge unfairly. But it was a shock to realize that all these long years, when she had imagined that he was longing for her and thinking of her, he had in reality been quite happy with another home, another woman—perhaps children!

Tears of anger and hurt pride forced their way to Christina's eyes.

Thank God, she did not care for him! How would she have felt then? Now her strongest feeling was disgust and dislike. With all her heart she could allow herself to despise George now.

And Miss White had said that everybody knew—everybody probably but she herself! Oh, it was low, degrading, insulting!

Then suddenly an idea flashed into her head.

If George had done this—if he was so different from what she had thought him—need she feel bound to go on sacrificing all her wishes, hopes, tastes to him?

A light came into Christina's blue eyes: her writing!

She drew a long, breathless sigh.

She got up and went across the room, slowly, very slowly, to the only one of her boxes she kept there. She had wanted something with a key—something safe from George's good-natured scrutiny, which completely ignored private rights as between husband and wife.

There, at the very bottom of the box, she had stored away that precious last story of hers, and everything else connected with her writing, and since she had given her promise she had never once opened the box.

She knelt down with her keys in her hand, and the old look of excitement and hope coming back into her face.

Then she paused. Was she quite sure Miss White's hasty words were true?

She drew the key out of the lock hastily, with a change in her face, almost back to the old expression of impatient endurance. Before everything she must act up to her own ideas of justice.

Something told her that it was true—it must be true—but she must *know*. She would have liked to bury the whole memory at the back of her mind, but if she wanted to find out if it was true she could not do this.

Who could she question? What proof could she find?

Gradually she realized that from George alone could she know if she might believe this.

And yet there seemed a coarseness—a sort of vulgarity—in appealing to him. He would probably tell her that she ought not to talk of such things.

Then she roused herself with a start, as the clock in the drawing room struck eleven.

George would be in almost immediately, and to-night she could not talk to him. She must be in bed, and able at least to pretend sleep when he came.

But there was not much real sleep for her; she was far too much excited.

All sorts of ideas for stories kept flashing into her mind, mixed up with confused recollections of what people in books and in real life had said and done in a case like hers. Sometimes she was inclined to think that she was making too much of the whole matter, and sometimes that she was making too little.

Then she fell asleep at last, to wake up quite as undecided in the morning. If only there had been somebody she could consult—if only she had not had to depend entirely on her own point of view, with much misgiving that it might not be the right one.

She took the whole of next day to make up her mind what to do—whether she should speak to George and put the thing into words, or not. She thought of it as she shopped in Strada Reale in the morning, when she went to tea on the Dauntless with George in the afternoon, and afterwards to hear the naval massed bands in the square—she thought of it especially when she met Miss White on the stairs, and gave her a cold bow.

In the evening she and George were alone together.

Christina was again sitting by the fire with a book on her knee, as she had been sitting the evening before, but this time she had no wish to read. Half against her will her eyes followed every movement of her husband.

He was playing patience.

He stood before a table, with half a dozen little packs of cards spread out upon it, and he considered them with much anxious thought on his red face.

He pursed up his lips and shook his head in perplexity.

"Did you ever see anything so annoying, Kitty?" he said. "Come over here till I explain it to you."

How much easier it would be to believe the story without question.

But to know that it was true—to feel free from the moral obligation of holding herself always at George's beck and call—what would she not do for that?

How delightful it would be to be able to answer at times like this, and without a prick of conscience: "No thank you, George; I had rather read."

Had he played patience in his Chinese home? What had his Chinese wife thought of him? Were there little Chinese atoms of humanity that belonged to him, and did he ever think of them and wish himself back?

Christina pictured to herself a little creature in Chinese garb, with George's face, and laughed suddenly, being very much ashamed of herself a moment later.

"What is amusing you?" said George, rather impatiently. He did not want to be disturbed—it was necessary for him to concentrate all his attention on the end of his game.

"Come and sit down comfortably on the sofa when you have finished," said Christina. "I want to talk to you."

She was not quite sure even yet that she would ask her question.

George came over presently; he was a little ruffled by the perversity of the cards, and he said so, two or three times over.

Then he established himself on the sofa, put up his boots, and yawned once or twice. After which he hunted in the pockets of his morning coat for his knife, and began to trim his nails with much interest.

Christina made up her mind.

She directed her attention away from him, not because she did not wish to face him, but because she did not wish

to see his occupation. It might make her speak more sharply than she intended.

"George," she said, "I want to ask you a question; but before I do I must explain that there's no ill feeling, whatever your answer may be."

He laughed. "Ill feeling!" he said. "There's not likely to be ill feeling between us, old child."

Christina began to poke the fire nervously.

"In China," she began, looking round at George with some curiosity. He was quite unconscious. "Is it true that you had—that you lived—that you had a—sort of wife out there?" said Christina, with much hesitation and embarrassment. Put it as she might, it seemed a brutal sort of question from her to him.

When she turned round again to see how he had taken it, he was sitting up on the sofa, with a crimson, dismayed face.

Just for a moment his manner of composed self-appreciation had deserted him.

"My—my dear old child!" he stammered.

Christina interrupted him.

"There," she said, "it's all right. Don't say any more. There's no need for any more. Help me to tidy up the table."

"But, Kitty—Kitty, darling—what is all this? Who has been talking to you? What are you going to do?"

George was still dismayed; he jumped up and caught her arm.

"Do? Put away these cards," she returned, with rather a hard little laugh. "We both hate scenes, so let us leave the whole business there. It's all right, only do let my arm go and sit down."

"But, old girl, you don't understand. You don't fancy I ever cared about a soul but you? It's quite different, too, from an Englishwoman—it's nothing—lots of the fellows did the same. It doesn't count, I assure you."

He was regaining his old confidence in himself and his old manner.

"You know, old girl, you are making too much of it," he said, half patronizingly. "I really couldn't help it, and you mustn't take it as an insult to you. I went out to

China with my head full of you—mad about you—and with only a legal ceremony between us."

Then, still holding her arm, he put his view of the matter before her plainly and rather coarsely, gradually recovering his own excellent opinion of himself as he spoke.

"Don't be foolish, old child," he ended; "you may feel quite sure of me now. And I don't care to discuss such things with you."

Christina did not trouble to remind him that he and not she had continued the conversation.

She began to sort the cards into packs thoughtfully, with her eyes on George's self-satisfied round face.

"Don't you ever think of her?" she said, slowly. "Haven't you ever a single regret?"

"Regret! Not I! You needn't be jealous, young lady."

Christina half smiled.

"Don't you think it is rather a pity of her?" she said. "However, there's no use in talking about it."

"And you won't let it make any difference, will you?"

Christina looked across the table at George with an expression in her eyes he had never seen there before.

"It's all over," she said; "isn't that enough? Now I am going to bed. Don't forget to turn out the lamps."

"Give me a kiss first," said George. He quite expected her to come over to him obediently as she always did.

But she only laughed, and turned round at the door to give him a little nod.

"No, thank you, George," she said lightly.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

"Look here, McLeod," said Grant, "have you called on the Ruskins since that dinner?"

In the officers' quarters at Pembroke space was decidedly limited, and Grant was standing in the doorway, because just at present there did not seem to be too much room for him inside.

McLeod had pulled his long chair across the room, and was very comfortably established in it, in a costume which was doubtless comfortable if inelegant and rather scanty. He had all three of his dogs scrambling over him, and portions of his uniform strewed the floor in all directions.

The regiment had spent the morning at the Marsa being reviewed, and had marched back to Pembroke against a strong wind and through clouds of dust. Officers and men had reached camp hot, thirsty, and tired, and after a long whisky and soda at the mess, McLeod, like the rest, had proceeded to get out of his uniform as quickly as he could. He was very comfortable indeed now, in his long chair, with a hookah, which he preferred to an ordinary pipe when he was tired.

He had his back to the door, and Grant had to repeat his question before he woke up to anybody's presence.

"I want to know if you have called on the Ruskins since that dinner," repeated Grant.

"Eh? what?" said McLeod, rousing himself with a start, and wheeling round in his chair to face Grant. "Called on the Ruskins? Holy Moses! neither I have! It's more than a week ago, isn't it? Nearer a fortnight."

"Let's go and get shut of it this afternoon. What do you say?"

McLeod nodded assent. He did not feel particularly inclined for a dusty expedition to Sliema, but it was a free afternoon, and he had almost always to play polo, or to take out the boat, or to do linesman at some of the regimental football matches.

"I bar walking, though," said Grant.

"By Jove! so do I this afternoon," said McLeod, lazily.

Then he returned to his hookah, but Grant lingered.

"The general gave it pretty hot to No. 5 company, didn't he? I can't think what came to McFerran—it wasn't my fault in the least."

"It was rather rough luck, when you had Lady Eva Wrench down to look at you," said McLeod. Jinks, who had profited by his late state of health to inaugurate many freedoms, proceeded to crawl up his master's person with the intention of licking his nose, and was kindly but firmly repulsed.

"Yes, she was there," said Grant, with much complacence; "we're going it rather hot and strong at present. But it won't do; she's too expensive. By George! she's as bad as a married woman for screwing presents out of you, and I am stony broke for the next couple of months; London about used me up."

"Well, you've been amazingly constant," said McLeod; "one whole month, isn't it?"

Grant laughed. After a gratified pause, seeing that McLeod had no intention of pursuing the subject, he showed signs of departure.

"What will you do about the boat if Kennedy goes home to the depot?" he said.

"Put in Seton-Kerr. I am not sure that he isn't the better man of the two. It's a case of much splash and little pull with Kennedy."

"It's not settled what day we dine him, I suppose?"

McLeod shook his head. Was there ever such a fellow to talk as Grant, he thought to himself, impatiently.

"Well, ta-ta for the present. I have to go round and speak to Sergeant Lennox about some business of McFerran's. What time will you start?" said Grant.

As he walked away he said to himself that there was something up with McLeod undoubtedly; he wasn't half as good company as he used to be. Had he not got over Beresford's death yet, or was it that afternoon in underground Valetta?

But McLeod had regained his pleasantest manner later on, when he and Grant found themselves on the way to Sliema.

Polo had been stopped for the last fortnight, owing to the state of the ground, and Nur-el-din was very fresh and bucked about the road in pure lightness of heart. Grant's pony, P. P. C., had had the honour of carrying Lady Eva Wrench to St. Paul's Bay the day before, and was consequently by no means so exhilarated, which was just as satisfactory to his rider, considering the dusty state of the road.

McLeod was at his best on horseback; he rode much better than he walked.

They did not hurry their ponies; the road was for the most part either up or down hill, and was very stony and dusty. McLeod was anxious to take as little as possible out of Nur-el-din, and Grant was equally anxious about his boots and breeches.

It was quite four o'clock by the time they reached Sliema, and made their way along the still uprooted road to the Ruskins' door.

The English butler who came to answer their knock greeted McLeod as an old friend.

"Miss Gerty came last night, sir," he said.

"What? who?" said Grant, with a hasty glance at himself in a glass in the hall.

McLeod began to laugh.

"Good old Grant! You scent prey at once!" he said.

"What a disgusting way of putting it!" said Grant; "but hang it all, old chap, you might have told me."

With which he proceeded to remove carefully every speck of dust from his boots.

"You see, I wanted to have a look in myself. I was afraid of being completely extinguished," said McLeod.

Truth to tell, he had completely forgotten Miss Ruskin-Boyd's existence.

"Come on, for goodness' sake," he added, impatiently; "how much longer are you going to keep the man on the stairs waiting to show us in?"

The revolution in the alcove, Lady Ruskin's special demesne, was what first struck McLeod when they came in; her music had disappeared, her work was no longer on its accustomed table, and the curtain, which generally shut off her corner from the rest of the room, had been drawn back.

Lady Ruskin's first words of greeting were the same as the butler's had been in the hall.

"Andrew, Gerty has come," she said.

Gerty herself appeared a few minutes later, with the tea.

She was a stout, rather figureless little person, with an extremely pretty, childish face and very fair hair.

She greeted McLeod warmly, bringing out her words with a sort of cheery shout, which she had inherited from her father.

"Hullo, Andrew! Do you remember me? I was a nice little girl of twelve when you saw me last."

"You were a very bad, bold little girl," said McLeod, shaking hands.

Miss Ruskin-Boyd burst out laughing. When she laughed she looked prettier than ever, and dimples came into her pink cheeks.

"You are thinking of my farewell words. What was it you had done to annoy me? I can't remember. But I shall never forget how flabbergasted you and everybody else looked when I requested you at the top of my voice to 'Go to ——.'"

Lady Ruskin broke off her flagging conversation with Mr. Grant to say "Gerty dear!" in a tone of shocked remonstrance.

"It *was* rather a startler from a sweet little angel, in short frocks with her hair down her back," said McLeod, laughing; "and you said it with all your heart, too."

"Well, it resulted in mamma's rousing herself for once in her life, and packing me off to school. Are you going to bury the hatchet, and help me to have a good time this winter?"

"You couldn't come to a worse person for that," said

McLeod; "I never go out. Here's one of the society men of the regiment."

"But it's quite different when you have a cousin to look after. I am going everywhere, and I am going to see everything."

"Gerty dear, will you have some tea?" said Lady Ruskin.

"Well, a whisky and soda is really much more in my line," said Gerty, "and in Andrew's, too, I expect."

"I suppose you got accustomed to drinking whisky and soda at school?" said McLeod; and to himself he was stigmatizing his cousin as bad form and an affected little fool.

"That is the sort of sarcastic remark that used to provoke my strong language," Gerty said. "Don't you remember when papa used to make me drink whisky and soda with a straw out of his glass? And I can turn you out a cocktail that will make you sit up."

"Thank you very much," said McLeod, calmly. "I warn you it takes a good deal to make me sit up."

Lady Ruskin and Grant had both been trying to listen to Gerty as they talked to each other, and consequently their conversation had languished, and when Gerty drew her chair nearer the tea table, and announced that as nothing better was forthcoming she would have some tea, the conversation at once became general.

"There's one thing certain—you must give a dance at Pembroke camp to bring me out," said Gerty, firmly.

"Gerty dear," said Lady Ruskin, in mild remonstrance.

"Nonsense, mamma. Of course Andrew must do his duty."

Andrew did not look exhilarated. He twisted his moustache and shook his head.

"I am sorry," he said. "But the messroom has a stone floor, and we are so far out of Valetta——"

"Wait till we come in to Valetta in February," said Grant.

"Nonsense!" said Gerty. "I know other regiments have given dances at Pembroke. I think it was the Scots Greys who gave three running."

"In the summer, perhaps," said Grant, apologetically.

"Did they dance over the stones?" said McLeod.

"I don't know, I am sure; but I know I met a girl who was married in consequence, and she said that though they asked no outside men, after the third dance there was hardly a girl in Malta who wasn't engaged."

"Good Lord!" said McLeod.

"What a capital thing!" said Grant. "How did they manage it?"

"Well, it was like this," said Gerty: "At the first dance, every officer in the regiment gave the girl he liked best one leg of a scissors; at the next, he gave her something—I forget what; and at the third, each man gave his particular girl a golden key, and they all proposed."

"At any special word of command?" said McLeod, laughing.

Lady Ruskin laughed a little too, but rather uncomfortably. She had evidently much misgiving as to what her offspring might say next.

"It's a capital way of doing things," said Grant, with warm approval; "but I hope they are a moneyed regiment. I am afraid we could hardly manage it; what do you think, McLeod?"

"Whenever I have my fortune told, I am always to marry a fair man in the army," said Gerty, "and I always begged them to say he was in the Camerons, Andrew."

"Gerty dear!" said Lady Ruskin.

Gerty was deaf.

"I am immensely flattered," said McLeod. "Did they ever say auburn hair?"

"He means the latest in brick-reds," said Grant. "Don't particularize the colour, Miss Ruskin-Boyd, and give the whole regiment a chance."

"I haven't settled on anything, except that he must have good legs," said Gerty.

"Then McLeod won't do for the place. He's a riding man."

Lady Ruskin was in consternation; the conversation seemed to her to be getting exceedingly free and easy, but she was quite incapable of controlling it.

McLeod realized that it was not only because she was

afraid of the drains that Lady Ruskin had been anxious to keep Gerty at home for another year.

Gerty seemed to have read his thoughts.

"Fancy, mamma wanted me to stay another winter at school! Not likely! I am going to every dance and everything of every kind!"

"You'll be the death of your mother, then," said McLeod, calmly. "She'll soon tire of it all, Cousin Amy," he added, consolingly.

But Lady Ruskin knew her daughter better.

"And you are going to mount me and take me for gallops, Andrew."

"Indeed I am not, my dear. You are not going to gallop the roads on my ponies."

"You shall on mine, then," said Grant, gallantly.

"*Thank* you," said Gerty, with an indignant glance at her cousin; "and if Andrew won't ask me to tea in his room, *you* will, won't you?"

"Of course I will."

"And I intend to make papa give a dance on the Phæton."

"No, don't do that, I beg of you," said Grant. "Kilts in the daytime are a horrid nuisance, and on board ship they are worse."

"Oh!" said Gerty, with a scream of delight, "*kilts*—how heavenly!"

McLeod rose to go. He was not interested in Gerty, and she was evidently determined to monopolize the whole conversation.

"You'll come to see our Christmas tree for the soldiers' children, won't you, Lady Ruskin?" said Grant, as he shook hands. "It's on the 24th, and I know there are some small naval races on the same day, but still——"

"Oh, will you all wear kilts?" cried Gerty.

"I am afraid not," said Grant.

Gerty said good-by with a sigh.

When the two young men had gone, Lady Ruskin ventured upon a timid remonstrance.

"Gerty dear," she said, "don't you think it would be better not to be quite so—familiar—in your manner with strangers?"

Gerty had seated herself near the tea table, and helped herself to a large slice of plumcake. She looked up with a frown.

"How absurd, mamma!" she said, sharply. "You don't understand how people talk nowadays."

Miss Ruskin-Boyd spoke with the assurance of half a dozen seasons in town—not at all as if she had only left school within the last few weeks.

Lady Ruskin looked snubbed and felt it.

"I wish you wouldn't always look as if you were afraid I was going to say or do something dreadful," Gerty pursued, reprovingly. "I am perfectly able to take care of myself."

"But, my dear child——"

"It would be much better, mamma, if you would try and keep your cap straight instead of scolding me," said Gerty. "It is nearly off your head altogether now. You don't understand, mamma; all your ideas of society come from the days when men wore knee breeches and ruffles, and brought their feet into the first position and made a low bow every time they spoke to a girl."

Lady Ruskin protested feebly.

"My dear child, how old do you imagine I am? And you really mustn't speak to me like that."

"Oh, bother!" said Gerty, pertly.

She had a wholesome contempt for her mother's reasoning powers, and a very firm belief in her own.

She had always been accustomed to hear her father call her mother a fool, and her brothers speak and act before her exactly as seemed to them good.

It was a position which Lady Ruskin had partly brought upon herself, by her unselfishness carried too far. She had accustomed her husband and then her children to consider that her wishes were of no importance, and were to be considered last of all, and they had learned the lesson quickly and completely. It was partly her own fault that she was a mere cipher in her family; an ounce or two of wholesome selfishness would have won her more respect from her children and probably more affection.

As for Gerty, she had very soon learned that her pert

speeches amused her father and his friends, and made them laugh.

It was amusing to hear a pretty little girl in white frocks call for whisky and soda, or a cocktail, and have a sharp reply ready for everybody.

And though the white frocks were lengthened now, and the golden hair twisted up, Gerty was still imbued with the idea that her mission in life was to make men laugh.

"What a good time I am going to have!" she said, drawing a long breath. "How very, very glad I am that I have come out!"

CHAPTER II.

One siroc afternoon Andrew McLeod was strolling down Strada Mezzodi, when an impulse came to him to go and see Mrs. Stoddart.

He had been spending the afternoon in Valetta, which was a most unusual thing for him to do.

His company was doing field training, but he had got away early, and come in to Valetta about some business connected with the boat races in February. He had lunched at the club, and then he had gone to look up Campbell at Florian and Gordon on guard. He had gone up to the gym., and on the way he had met Grant's brother, who was taking some ladies up the signal tower; consequently he had, to his disgust, been let in for a tea party on the Dauntless next day.

Then he had gone down to Seliba's in the Ditch with another man to try a new pony, and finally at four o'clock he was on his way back to Pembroke, when he suddenly found himself opposite the Stoddarts' flat.

McLeod had just lately not been in the best of spirits. That day in underground Valetta had affected him, as well as Campbell's estimate of him, and the feeling that something similar might possibly occur again would not be shaken off.

The men in the regiment noticed that he was not as

cheery as usual, and consequently more or less left him alone. They were the best of good fellows all of them, but not one was to McLeod what his friend Beresford had been.

Lady Ruskin was entirely engrossed with Gerty.

Mrs. Stoddart—McLeod realized vaguely that with her, too, life in general had gone wrong.

He did not think out any of these things clearly; if he had, he would have probably called himself a coward and gone straight on to Pembroke.

He had scarcely thought of Christina since the club dance, but now he remembered that she was a very friendly young woman, and that he ought to have called long ago.

So he went in and walked upstairs without hesitation —he was not given to hesitation.

The Stoddarts were having a happy afternoon, with the man from Pohoomal's Indian shop.

He had arrived shortly after lunch, followed by an assistant, both laden with white linen packs, and Christina was hugely enjoying her afternoon.

She had begun by assuring herself that there was no chance of visitors so early, and later on she had decided that in such a siroc no one was likely to be out.

Certainly McLeod was the very last person in Malta she expected to see.

He found her comfortably established on the drawing-room sofa, with George standing beside her in uniform, and evidently on the eve of departure.

The Indian man was squatted on the floor in front of her, and his assistant moved from his place by the doorway to allow McLeod to come in. The drawing room was not a large one, and there did not seem to be much space for him to advance among the white linen packs and piles of tablecloths, rugs, and silver ornaments which strewed the floor.

A strong whiff of Maltee greeted him as he came in.

Christina jumped up and shook hands across a pile of rugs; she looked undoubtedly glad to see him.

"Captain McLeod, I am amazed, but delighted," she said, in her most friendly tone. "You find us in a certain

amount of confusion, but really I have been trying to entice this old gentleman to go away for the last hour or so."

"Don't believe her," said George. "She can't make up her mind, that's all, and consequently both Joe and I will be late for our appointments."

"Oh, the ingratitude of men!" said Christina. "I am choosing him a surprise for Christmas."

"I rather think it is to be a silver powderbox," said George, with his loud laugh. "Here, McLeod, I have managed to clear a chair for you."

There was no tragedy in the air. Christina's troubles were evidently not now in the ascendant; indeed, it seemed to McLeod that she looked brighter and more animated than she had been since the days when he had played bull with her on the Australia.

He sat down rather discontentedly; he had grown tired of the Indian shops long ago, and was not in the humour to be amused by bargaining.

The Indian man thought he had been left long enough out of the conversation.

He turned with engaging politeness to McLeod, and got up to make a low bow.

"I will show gentleman pretty cloth lady want—yes, please?"

"I am sure I don't want it, if you want all that money for it," said Christina. "Don't look so unhappy, Captain McLeod; we will do our best to send off our friend, and then we can have tea."

"I don't take tea, so I am afraid that won't console me," said McLeod; "but I am sorry I look unhappy—I don't feel so, I assure you."

But, all the same, he watched the Indian man begin to unroll yet another pack, with some dismay.

"I ask very little money," he said, turning to Christina, with an engaging smile. "I soft—softer than butter; gentleman tell you so."

With which he called up his subordinate, and between them they displayed a lengthy cloth bedecked with gold and scarlet.

Then he laid it down, and surveyed it with uplifted hands of admiration.

"All money I make go to my sweet mamma and papa far away," he said, plaintively. "But I give you this cheap because you good lady; I lose money for this."

"I wouldn't have you do that," said Christina, laughing —"certainly not. And I don't want that tablecloth at all; I don't like it—I wouldn't have it as a gift!"

"I lose money, but lady send plenty friends, and not tell how cheap I sell to her. See, I give you this—all this beautiful work—only three pounds! Just three pounds, lady—yes, please?"

But Christina declined the allurement, and turned to consult McLeod about a pretty silver powderbox.

And George said: "Come now, Joe, you must really be off to-day, and come back and see lady another day. She's tired of you—had enough of you."

A remark which the Indian man received as a huge and most amusing joke.

"A tablecloth, three rugs, a set of red legs, and a powderbox is quite enough for one afternoon," said Christina, and George looked as if he thought it too much.

"I am sure I don't know what you will do with more rugs," he said.

"Oh, I shall easily find a use for them," said Christina, carelessly.

Then the Indian man tore himself away with much difficulty, and, to McLeod's relief, it occurred to Christina that it would be desirable to have the French window open.

And George with profuse apologies went off to his ship, his wife following his departure with an unconcealed sigh of relief.

"Now, Captain McLeod, you will find that rocking-chair far more comfortable," she said; "and as you have done such a remarkable thing as come to pay a call, you must pay a good long one."

McLeod gave her the smile which she considered the nicest thing about him.

"I have never thanked you for the pony," she went on; "it has such comfortable paces. You mustn't think me rude, but I have such an abominable memory. And now I have more cause for gratitude, as you have saved me from several hours all alone with an idiotic book."

"But why choose an idiotic book?" said McLeod.

"I shan't again," said Christina; "but my husband is so frightfully particular. He is shocked when I tell him that a married woman may read anything."

She had once before told McLeod that her husband was particular, and the difference in her tone struck him at once. There was half a sneer now in the way she spoke, and there had been none then.

"Fortunately," she said, "he never reads a book himself, and he's going to fetch me The Heavenly Twins from the library this evening, under the impression that it is a treatise on astronomy."

She laughed. She had been very honest in her reading until now—very careful not to read those books which she thought George would disapprove of, foolish as she considered that disapproval.

But now it was all different.

"Well," said McLeod, "I suppose women do read everything in these days; but I think it is rather a pity."

"Your wife will have pretty strict rules made for her, too, I can see," said Christina, laughing; "but it is a little late to begin with me, as I read Tom Jones and Ouida when I was fifteen, though I haven't confessed to George that I was so abandoned."

"I don't think women ought to read coarse books," said McLeod, playing with his walking stick; "as the world goes nowadays there isn't the same danger in it for men. Besides, I know lots of fellows who read a book simply for the sake of the dirt in it. What would a woman be like who did that?"

"I am not quite so far gone as that," said Christina, laughing a little, though she was rather annoyed.

"I didn't mean to say anything rude," said McLeod, stroking his moustache.

"Only women never can understand generalities; isn't that it?" said Christina. "I'll tell you the kind of book I like: no plot in particular, characters that are alive, lots of conversation, and a certain amount of love-making—because I never was in love myself. Can you believe that?"

"Certainly—why not?" said McLeod. "Everybody isn't bound to fall in love."

"Did you never?"

McLeod did not like questions about himself. He moved impatiently and laughed.

"Never," he said. "I daresay I was near it once or twice, but then in my case it was different."

"Well, it will be very awkward if it ever happens to me," said Christina, meditatively.

McLeod considered her far too outspoken. His instinct was always to be silent about what deeply interested him, and he could scarcely believe that she was speaking genuinely what came into her head.

"Do you think a girl can get on all her life without falling in love?" she said. "Nobody seems able to write a book without bringing it in. Do you remember, Anthony Trollope says he tried once with quite an old lady as his heroine, but do what he would, she managed to fall in love before the end."

"I tried, too," said McLeod, laughing a little.

Christina half sprang to her feet in her excitement.

"You?" she cried. "Did you write?"

He nodded carelessly.

He was quite unaware that he had gained a completely new interest in Christina's eyes. His writing had been to him an amusement which he had taken up more from circumstances than from any real love of it, during the two years when he had hoped to go on the stage. He had recognised his limitations, and reserved all his enthusiasm for the stage.

But to Christina he had changed all in a moment from a commonplace young man, with red hair, a high collar, and rather a swaggering manner—a young man who could make himself very pleasant when he liked, but who did not always like—to the most interesting individual in Malta.

"You wrote books?" she said, breathlessly.

McLeod laughed.

"Nothing half so interesting," he said. "I had been spending money pretty freely and was rather hard up, and thanks to my knowing a good many literary people well, and not to my talents, I got a chance of doing criticisms and odd articles, and I liked it, and could do them decently enough."

"But were you content to remain there?" said Christina.

"I did try a story once," said McLeod. "I thought it rubbish, and so did everybody who had the privilege of reading it. After which I recognised that though I could write English I wasn't gifted with a bump of imagination. But that was never the way my ambition lay."

"And you have never tried since you got into the army?"

McLeod's face grew suddenly very grave.

"Never," he said, shortly.

Christina leaned forward, a little colour coming into her cheeks.

"But will you help me?" she said. "Oh, you can help me so much if you will!"

CHAPTER III.

Mr. Grant was in his element.

He stood on the messroom steps at Pembroke, in very light clothes, which suited his dark, handsome face; and with a cigarette between his lips and a pink rose in his buttonhole, he was conscious that he looked very complete, indeed.

He had an afternoon before him in which it would be his duty to squire about any of the greatest ladies in Malta he chose. He had prepared his room for inspection, and borrowed McLeod's Cairngorm ornaments to supplement his own, which were not so good, and dazzle the eyes of privileged visitors.

Now he modestly imagined that he was completely ready, and he had established himself where he would be able to take stock of the visitors as they arrived.

Half a dozen officers made their appearance from the messroom, and gave every sign of being struck by his magnificence.

"Great Scott, Tommy! Got up regardless of expense!" said somebody.

"D—n it!" said Gordon, who was on duty, "I thought I should win in a canter this afternoon, but all I have left to hope for now is to run a good second."

"It's easily seen he expects his young woman," said another.

"I suppose you know that the colonel has sent round an order that you are to lead off the kids at 'hunt the slipper' and 'kiss in the ring'?" said Seton-Kerr.

Grant smiled upon them calmly; he was very good-tempered and very much hardened to this sort of comment.

McLeod and Captain Kennedy appeared.

They had been busy putting the finishing touches to the Christmas tree. Captain Kennedy, as the tallest man in the regiment, was to perform as Father Christmas, and he hurried off to dress.

"I can see a couple of *carrozzes* and a dogcart at the far side of the bay," said Campbell, who had ridden out from Florian for lunch. "There! I thought that would make Ananias sit up! You need not put on all those fancy airs for the next twenty minutes, old fellow."

"Can't you leave me alone?" said Grant, good-humouredly; "these witticisms are a trifle stale. They come up again smiling every few days."

"There's very little original talent in the regiment," said Campbell.

McLeod went off to his room. He had not got out of uniform, and he needed brushing and washing as well after his work with the tree.

Grant appeared to have been borrowing pretty freely in his absence, and McLeod took the trouble of going round to his room, in hopes of being able to recover a few of his things, but he found the door prudently locked.

When he came back to the square everything was in full swing.

The pipers were performing in the mess garden, and in the square the band were getting their instruments into position, while there were groups of gaily dressed ladies

in all directions, and carriages, dogcarts, and riders arriving every few minutes.

McLeod had the band on his hands, and stopped in the square to speak to the bandmaster.

Then, with his usual directness, he went to look for Mrs. Stoddart.

As he went into the anteroom, he met Grant and Gerty Ruskin-Boyd coming out, and they stopped to speak to him.

"This is awfully jolly," said Gerty, radiantly—"almost as good as a dance."

Grant laughed.

"It's not McLeod's idea of bliss," he said; "we tell him off to take all the old ladies in to tea when we have a *tamasha* of any kind; he prefers it."

"Well, I am looking for a young lady this time," said McLeod. "Do you know if Mrs. Stoddart has arrived, Tommy?"

"Can I believe my ears?" said Grant.

"Why, you mean my old schoolfellow, Chrissy Lorimer?" said Gerty. "I have just been talking to her—she's having a very good time in there."

"Of course, I had forgotten she was at school with you," said McLeod.

"Well, I didn't see much of her," said Gerty, "because she was so much older. And I daresay I shouldn't remember her at all, only once when I had bronchitis she used to come up after school and sit with me, and hold my hand, and tell me the most ripping stories. It was rather good of her, wasn't it? and I haven't forgotten it."

"I'm quite equal to being as good," said Grant.

"Will you tell me stories this afternoon?"

"Yes, and hold your hand, too," said Mr. Grant, kindly.

McLeod passed on.

Mrs. Stoddart was talking to two or three men, and seeing this, he thought he would not speak to her just then; but she saw him, and gave him such a welcoming bow that he changed his mind.

"Would you like to come and see the mess plate?" he said, in answer to her eyes.

He was quite aware that he was spreading amazement among the surrounding group, and rather enjoyed it.

Nobody had gone in to tea as yet; the governor and his wife were expected, and they were waited for. Consequently, McLeod and Christina found they had the mess-room to themselves.

"I shall have to go and see after lighting up the tree in a minute," said McLeod, "so we must be quick. Mrs. Stoddart, would you let me turn that story into a play?"

Christina stared at him.

"It has got into my head, and I am sure it would act. I had a good deal of practice in that sort of thing long ago, and I think I could do it."

"Then you think it is——"

"Very strong. Only a few characters are absolutely needed, and I could get the Florian theatre, or, for that matter, why not the Manoel."

Christina listened to him in breathless joy and excitement. She had never seen him eager before, and she was surprised to see how all his fair, resolute face changed and lighted up.

"I *know* it would act," he went on. "Burlesques every regiment takes up, but——"

"So this is the plate. You can tell me who presented everything?"

McLeod looked round hastily to find what this sudden change of conversation meant, and saw George coming over to them.

He went on in a changed voice:

"I am afraid I can't. We lost all our plate up the Nile in the Egyptian campaign, and this is only—— How do you do?"

George came up, walking with every part of his body, and particularly his shoulders, as he always did, and with a beaming smile.

"Well," he said, in a would-be jocund tone, "I was under the impression that this show was to be a Christmas tree for soldiers' children; but where are the children and where's the tree?"

"The tree is in the sergeants' mess, and you will very soon see both it and the children," said McLeod.

"Then, in the meantime, come on, old girl, till I show you round the camp," said George, gaily.

"Thank you," said Christina, "Captain McLeod is going to do that."

She did not look at him as she spoke, being quite aware that he had not the least intention of doing anything of the kind.

"Come out and listen to the band, then."

"No, thank you, George," said Christina, still very sweetly. "It would be quite unheard of for a husband and wife to go marching about together."

George was completely unused to a repulse from his wife. He looked disconcerted.

McLeod said nothing. He stood still and balanced his cap on his walking stick with an air of complete abstraction.

"The fact of the matter is," said Christina, cheerfully, "that I want to speak to Captain McLeod about something."

George was much taken aback. He tried to laugh.

"Oh, in that case——" he said. "Secrets from your husband—that won't do, young lady!"

But he looked rather crestfallen as he went away, and Christina almost repented and called him back.

When he was gone, she raised her eyes to McLeod's and found he was looking at her.

A faint colour came into her cheeks.

"He doesn't know," she said.

McLeod must understand a good deal now, and she realized this with a certain relief.

"Then it wouldn't do to act it?" was all he said, after a pause.

"That needn't prevent you," said Christina; "I am not *afraid* of him. It is only because he hates me to write, and I hate rows, so it seems better to say nothing. But I don't care if he finds out. I am not afraid."

"He hates you to write?"

"Yes; he thinks as men used to think a generation ago—that a woman should do nothing but sit at home and do crochet work. He is just a generation behind, as—all—his—class—are," Christina ended slowly, and again she flushed as she met McLeod's eyes full.

He himself would never have spoken so plainly.

"He was shocked—horribly shocked—by that story,"

she said. "Should you have been, in his place, if I had been your wife?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't have liked it—I don't know," said McLeod. "A man is narrow-minded about his own women."

"You are truthful, at least," said Christina, "if not flattering."

She was hurt by his plain speaking, but she felt she had no right to show it; he had only answered her question.

McLeod returned to the point.

"But may I turn it into a play?" he said. "Will you help me? It wouldn't interfere with the story in any way, and there's acting in it."

"I couldn't help you, I am afraid," said Christina, shaking her head; "but of course I should be glad. Only——"

Another interruption came here.

Campbell put in his head at the door.

"Tommy, you tall fellows are wanted to light up the tree," he said.

"I suppose I must go," said McLeod. "Look here, Mrs. Stoddart, will you talk the story over with me? I should like to put both our ideas of it together. Couldn't I come and see you some day, or we might go for a ride perhaps?"

"Very well," said Christina.

"Will you send me a line when it suits you, then?"

They had been walking toward the messroom door as they talked, and were so near other people that she only nodded.

Campbell came up immediately.

"Now, Mrs. Stoddart," he said, "if you please you must bestow a little attention upon me. I never thought it an advantage to be short before."

Everybody was in the anteroom or the garden except Grant and Gerty Ruskin-Boyd, who had completely disappeared. They were not to be discovered anywhere.

They did not make their appearance even when tea was over, and all the rest of the guests were assembled on a platform at one end of the sergeants' mess to see the Christmas tree.

Lady Ruskin made their absence more marked by her anxious inquiries.

She demanded news of her offspring plaintively from everybody.

She had brought Gerty to Pembroke and lost her immediately, and she had been restlessly unhappy about it all afternoon.

Lord Ruskin, on the contrary, took matters with great philosophy, and, having found himself a seat on the platform between Lady Eva Wrench and Christina, he declined to further exert himself.

Christina saw McLeod in the distance, distributing presents to the children, but that was all she did see of him; he did not reappear in society.

When George proposed to go, after the tree, she was quite ready.

Lady Ruskin fluttered up as they were saying good-by to the colonel's wife.

"Mrs. Stoddart, have you seen Gerty anywhere about? It is quite time we were starting."

"Never you mind Gerty," said Lord Ruskin, with a laugh; "you may be sure she is perfectly happy, and she is not my daughter if she has not got somebody to take care of her."

But Lady Ruskin knew that when the Wrenches left he would not be so lenient.

"I am sorry I haven't seen her," said Christina; "but there is the magic lantern still."

Lady Ruskin shook hands forlornly.

"But everybody is going," she said, "and it will be so dark when we get home, with all those hills. If you see her, would you mind telling her that we are going?"

As they were driving through the gate of the square they did meet Grant and Gerty, and had the carriage pulled up to give Christina's message.

Gerty was looking very pretty and radiantly happy. It was always windy at Pembroke, and her fair hair was a little ruffled, but her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shining with excitement.

"Going home? Absurd!" she said. "*I* am not going till after the magic lantern."

"Certainly not," said Grant. "Why, you have specially engaged me to hold your hand if you are frightened in the dark."

"So don't let us go *near* mamma," said Gerty.

"You *are* a cool young lady, I must say," remarked George.

Gerty stared at him coldly.

"Good-by for the present, Chrissy. I am coming over to see you immediately," she said, jumping on the step of the *carrozze* to give Christina a schoolgirl kiss. "Come along quickly, Mr. Grant, or we shall be caught."

Christina liked to hear the old school name again, and it softened her to Gerty.

"It is a *shame* of Mr. Grant to make a fool of that child," she said, hotly.

"She is very well able to take care of herself," said George; "why, she's as bold as brass."

He was not in the best of humours. He had not enjoyed his afternoon very much; he had met none of his friends, and he was conscious that he had not been a success.

"Look here, Kitty," he said, "why did you speak to me like that in the messroom? What were you talking to McLeod about?"

"Ah," said Christina, carelessly, "that's a secret."

"I don't like you to talk, even in joke, as if it were possible for you to have secrets from your husband, with another man," said George.

"Don't let us talk about it, then," said Christina.

"Well, what was it about?" said George, persistently.

"I never knew men were so curious," said Christina. "What were we talking about? The mess plate, for one thing; and he asked me if I would go for a ride with him; and—— There's no more about your going to the Levant, is there?"

CHAPTER IV.

"SHUT up, will you?" said McLeod; "the fellows on the stage can't hear themselves speak!"

McLeod had dined Campbell at the club, and Campbell had dined not wisely, and was inclined to be noisy, which made him unwelcome behind the scenes.

They were at a smoking concert at the gymnasium. Most of the Camerons considered it too much of a journey from Pembroke to attend these Saturday functions, but McLeod was generally due, either as stage manager or to perform.

This evening he had a song and a duet in the second part, but at present he had nothing to do, as the Rifles were acting a small burlesque.

Campbell belonged rightfully to a party among the audience, but, as it consisted largely of ladies, McLeod was advising him under the circumstances to remain where he was, and he was protesting, rather too loudly.

"I am not so beastly screwed as all that," he remonstrated, indignantly. "Now I put it to you, Bones, I'm fit to walk a chalk line."

"You will walk out of this, if you don't hold your jaw," said McLeod. "For Heaven's sake, go and get yourself sober if you are going to sing Round the Town with me."

It was Campbell's one failing. He was a thorough little gentleman, excellent company, and in every other way a good fellow. It was a pity.

McLeod thought the best thing he could do was to leave him alone, and he strolled over to the stage door, where he had a good view of the audience. He liked society very much from a comfortable distance.

He was very stalwart and upright in his tight-fitting mess jacket and trews. His plain, strong face, coupled with his known dislike of society, attracted all women, and there were a good many girls there that evening who looked at him with interest, and would have liked to know Captain McLeod very much.

As for him, he much preferred his present position to a seat among the audience, and, having attended a couple

of rehearsals, he had no curiosity about what was going on on the stage.

He liked better to watch the faces of the audience, and amuse himself by noting those who were interested in the play, and those whose attention was completely distracted by the people they sat beside.

The room was closely packed, as it always was, with a foreground of ladies' dresses and officers' uniforms, and a background of soldiers and sailors and their womankind, dimly visible through a cloud of smoke. Soldiers and sailors lined the galleries, too, and in all cases they were the most interested, the most ready with applause.

McLeod watched an eager man in the gallery; he leaned forward, his arms on the railings, his face a picture of shifting feelings, utterly engrossed and oblivious of all around him. How much more thoroughly, how enviably they took their enjoyments in that class.

His eyes travelled along the front rows, and he exchanged a bow with Lady Eva Wrench, who was sitting between her brother and a tall sailor. Had Grant entirely deserted his allegiance?

Yes, there he was, near the end of the fifth row, seated next to Gerty Ruskin-Boyd, and with every appearance of belonging to the Ruskin-Boyd party.

McLeod frowned, by no means well pleased.

He looked round for Mrs. Stoddart, but could not see her. However, it was quite possible she was there nevertheless, for his position was too low to command the room. His thoughts wandered off to that projected play to which thoughts of Christina were only a pendent.

Could it be managed as he wished—could it be thoroughly well done? That remained to be proved, and if it could not, it should be given up altogether. But, having taken it in hand, he had not seriously the smallest intention of giving it up. He had not had such an interest in life for many a long day.

There was a fellow coming out for his health who had been at Eton with McLeod, and had since gone on the stage. He would help him, he felt sure, and any necessary scenery could easily be got out from London. Yes, he would do it.

An outburst of applause roused him to the fact that the first part of the evening's performance was over.

There was a certain amount of movement; a good many men made their way out of the room for a little fresh air and a cigarette.

Grant came up to McLeod.

"D—n it all!" he said, "you have the best of it. Those cane-seated chairs in trews are the very devil."

"Especially when you have to sit with your feet doubled up under your chair and without room to wink," said a man in the Rifles, who had just come up.

"God made me with legs," said another, who had been acting, "and so I never accept an invitation to join the audience at the gym."

"I say, have you and Lady Eva had a split, Tommy?" said Campbell, who had propped himself against the wall just inside the stage door.

Grant gave a gratified laugh.

"Not at all," he said. "She had the cheek to tell me the other day that I was making her conspicuous, and must talk to some one else, so I have taken her at her word—that's all."

"What a howling cad he is!" said McLeod, under his breath, to Campbell.

The others laughed.

"And, by Jove! I am making the running with a real smart little girl now——" Grant began.

McLeod touched his arm.

"That will do," he said.

"Eh? What?" said Grant, looking considerably taken aback. "I wasn't going to say any harm. What I really came to know was if you would ride with Mrs. Stoddart to-morrow, Jorrocks. Miss Ruskin-Boyd and I want a couple of gooseberry-pickers."

"Sorry I can't possibly," said Campbell; "I'm on guard to-morrow, worse luck."

"I will, if you like," said McLeod.

"Hold me up, somebody!" said Grant. "Do you feel ill, Tommy?"

"Don't be an ass!" said McLeod.

But he was a little thoughtful. If this play was to go

on, he must of necessity and also in the commonest civility see something of Mrs. Stoddart. And would not the smallest attention on his part make her talked about at once? More talked about than if a man like Grant were to go down on his knees to her in the middle of Strada Reale.

With a husband who was not of her own class, people would be even especially ready to talk in her case, and would he not be as bad as Grant if, with his eyes open, he gave rise to this?

As for Grant, it was all the same to him whether Campbell or McLeod came, and having settled the matter satisfactorily, he went back to his seat and retook it gingerly.

Gerty received him joyfully. She thought him the handsomest and smartest man she had ever met, and felt sure that every other girl in the room must envy her the attentions of this delightful being.

Probably Grant thought so, too.

"Is it all right about the ride?" she said, as he was trying to dispose of his legs, which were inconveniently long.

"It's all arranged," he said.

"Chrissy will go? That odious husband of hers came over to talk to me just now—the impertinence of the man!"

"Gerty dear!" Lady Ruskin remonstrated, from her neglected position on one side of her daughter.

Gerty's clear, loud young voice carried to some distance.

She took no notice further than an impatient movement.

"He *is* odious," she said to Grant; "look at him, strolling about as if the place belonged to him! How can she endure him?"

"It's a most romantic story," said Grant, exactly as he had said to Lady Eva Wrench a month ago.

But the story as given to Gerty had received considerable additions and improvements.

McLeod's appearance on the little stage interrupted him in the middle, and distracted Gerty's attention.

"Oh, there's Andrew!" she cried, so loudly that several people turned round to look at her.

Then came a thunder of welcome from the soldiers and sailors.

"Goodness, what a row!" said Gerty; "and Andrew has to stand there all the time! Doesn't it make him nervous?"

Grant lighted a cigarette.

"McLeod nervous? He doesn't know what it is!" he said. There was a faint suggestion of a sneer in his voice; he was always jealous of McLeod.

"He must sing awfully well," said Gerty.

"Nothing remarkable," said Grant. "It's the soldiers—they always give him a tremendous ovation. He's awfully popular among the men; they think the sun rises and sets on him."

"More popular than the others?"

"Oh, I suppose he is," said Grant, unwillingly. "No other fellow could be bothered to take all the trouble he does. He'll put himself out to any extent for the men. I've seen him drop polo to umpire at a fool company football match. But any fellow could be just as popular if he took the trouble."

"I suppose so," said Gerty. "I wish they would stop and let him sing."

"He's done one good job, anyway. He's turned a sergeant of his company into a steady soldier from something very much the reverse, the Lord knows how. And now I think he had better devote his attention to his particular friend Mr. Campbell, who is as screwed as an owl at the present moment. Wait till you see him come on to sing Round the Town with McLeod."

"Hush!" said Gerty.

McLeod had a fairly good and well-trained voice, and he was perfectly at his ease. He sang his song and was encored, and later on he and Campbell sang a duet in coster costume.

Then he was free, and he went over to talk to Lady Ruskin, who was sitting forlornly near the end of her row, very dull and very sleepy.

"Well, dear?" she said.

"You seem to be having rather a slow evening, Cousin Amy," said McLeod. "I am afraid you don't think much of your first smoking concert?"

"It is not very much what I care for," said Lady Rus-

kin; "of course I liked to hear you sing, dear. But Gerty was very anxious to come."

She looked at her daughter timidly, but Gerty was just then completely engrossed by Grant.

"You brought Grant with you, I see," said McLeod.

"I am not quite happy about Gerty," said Lady Ruskin, lowering her voice. "Mr. Grant seems very pleasant; but, Andrew, she is so very young."

McLeod stooped down, and answered her in a very low tone.

"I wanted to say something to you about it," he said. "It will be a great pity if Gerty gets herself talked about with him. He's more than a bit of an outsider."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do?" said Lady Ruskin, in dire distress. "You see the way things are. He sent her those flowers this afternoon. Is it serious, do you think? She is so very young."

Serious! If he had not been sorry for her, McLeod could have laughed.

"He sends flowers to dozens of girls," he said. "It is only a way of his—it doesn't mean anything."

"But she may think it does," Lady Ruskin said, "and she won't listen to me."

"I am sure it would be better not to let her see much of him," said McLeod.

Lady Ruskin looked at him helplessly. That was so very much more easily said than done with a young woman like Gerty.

"I am very much worried about it," she said.

McLeod felt the conversation had better stop for the present. If Gerty was engrossed to deafness, Grant was not, and there were plenty of people who knew Lady Ruskin in the rows both in front and behind.

Besides, he did not see what good he could do. He had gone so far as to express his opinion of a man in his regiment, a thing he did not care to do, but he could not possibly take the place of Gerty's mother.

He went back to his stand by the stage door, after discovering that Christina was well wedged in the middle of a row and quite beyond possibility of speech.

At the end of the concert he made his way to the door

of the gym., to see her on the way out, and say the few words which he considered politeness required.

He stopped her as she passed him with her husband.

"You are going to ride to-morrow with Grant and Gerty Ruskin-Boyd, aren't you?" he said. "I asked Grant if I might come too, and he referred me to you."

"I shall be very glad if you will come," said Christina, looking pleased.

"Then will you ride Tommy III again? I can send him in to Seliba in the morning, and come and fetch you whenever it suits you."

"Oh, thank you!" said Christina, with shining eyes.

"That's settled, then," said McLeod; "will it do if I call about half past two? I don't think I could well get in sooner, because of the field training; but we could settle to meet the others somewhere."

"It will do splendidly," said Christina.

McLeod bowed, and turned away to look for somebody to go out to Pembroke with him.

George pulled Christina's cloak.

"What was he saying to you?" he asked.

"Only settling about a ride to-morrow," said Christina.

"Why, Kitty, you had promised to come to tea on board with me."

"So I had. I am really sorry, George; I forgot all about it. But any day will do for you, won't it?"

George made none of his usual comments on the people they had seen on the way home. He was very silent and thoughtful.

CHAPTER V.

"WHAT is the meaning of all this, Kitty?" said George.

Christina was sitting in the drawing room, dressed and ready for her ride with McLeod, and very happy in the prospect.

She looked up tranquilly on George's hasty entrance.

"What is the matter?" she said, with much calmness.

"I should like to know what under the sun you are fitting up the lumber room for."

Christina laughed. A very observant person might have detected a trace of embarrassment in her manner, but poor George was not very observant.

"My dear boy, didn't I tell you I should find a use for those rugs?" she said, lightly.

"But what does it mean?" said George. "You never told me you wanted to furnish that room. Do you expect anybody to stay?"

"I am like the White Knight in Alice through the Looking-Glass," said Christina, with elaborate carelessness. "You know he always carried about a beehive in case he met with a swarm of bees. There is nothing like being prepared for everything."

"But——"

"Oh dear! Don't you know women are unreasoning beings, and never have a reason for what they do? I have just written to my mother, George; will you, like an angel, give my letter to the cook, and tell him to post it, or it will miss the mail."

"Good heavens, you don't expect her?" said George, hastily.

"Don't be a goose, I expect nobody," said Christina.

George looked puzzled.

"Well," he said, with a sigh, "I don't understand what has happened to you, Kitty. You are so different."

"Why, you are getting fanciful!" said Christina. "I do wish, dear, you would take off your cap and put out your pipe when you come into the drawing room."

George said "Pooh!" impatiently. He hated having his comfort interfered with.

He walked to the window and back again, fuming and threading his fingers through his beard, one of the many habits which nearly drove Christina to distraction.

"I know you call me 'dear' oftener than you used to do," he said, "but, all the same, you are not half so nice to me, Kitty"—a speech which so completely astounded

Christina that she simply sat and stared at him without attempting any reply.

She felt it was extremely obliging of McLeod to make his appearance just then.

George came downstairs to see them off, still in a gloomy frame of mind.

While McLeod was looking after Tommy III's girths, and lengthening the stirrup, he drew Christina aside.

"Kitty, you aren't going alone with that fellow?" he said.

"You know I'm not—though I don't see why I shouldn't. But we are to meet the others."

"But you are starting alone; everybody in Valetta will see you. I don't like it."

"I don't see what is to be done, unless you come and run alongside," said Christina, impatiently. Then she was sorry, and added cheerfully: "Do something amusing while I'm away, dear. Couldn't you get the Whites to go somewhere?"

Something in George's face as they rode away made McLeod look at Christina curiously, and she had not an absolutely clear conscience.

Undoubtedly, according to what he knew, George was absurdly unreasonable.

But it was a lovely afternoon; there was sun enough to make everything look cheerful, and a deliciously mild breeze, and Tommy III walked and trotted to perfection. It was impossible not to be in good spirits.

Nevertheless McLeod seemed to be in one of his unapproachable humours. He apologized for the presence of the three dogs, and then he subsided into a silence which Christina's social conscience made her feel it necessary to break every now and then.

McLeod and Grant had arranged to ride slowly on as far as Hamrung, where the first arrivals were to wait for the other two, and further arrangements could be made; but just before McLeod and Christina reached the beginning of the Hamrung road, Grant and Gerty overtook them at a hand-gallop, which made McLeod congratulate himself that Gerty was not riding one of his ponies.

He congratulated himself still further when they came

up, and he saw how exceedingly crooked his cousin's seat was, whereas Christina was as straight and upright as could be, and knew almost as much about horses as he did.

Gerty was in glorious spirits.

"Good-morning, Chrissy!" she shouted; "this is better than French exercises and conversation from three to four! Good-morning, my well-beloved and worthy cousin. Mr. Grant and I have settled that we are going to tea with Mr. Seton-Kerr at Civita Vecchia."

"But Captain McLeod and I have settled otherwise," said Christina. "Do keep your pony a bit off, Gerty. Civita Vecchia is much too far off these dark afternoons."

McLeod fully agreed.

"Cousin Amy wouldn't like you to be out so late," he said, and inwardly he added, "and P. P. C. would have a very sore back."

All Gerty's dimples came into sight.

"Mamma would think I was lost!" she said; "but she is always fussing, and she might as well have something to fuss about. She wasn't a bit pleased at my coming to-day, was she, Mr. Grant? She has marked you: 'Dangerous; only to be taken in small doses.'"

"But her daughter hasn't, has she?" said Grant, in a low voice.

"So I may as well be hanged for a sheep," said Gerty. "I shouldn't mind if we rode round the island, and weren't home till midnight."

"I hope Grant is less ambitious," said McLeod.

"Supposing we go to San Antonio gardens and on to Casal Lia for tea?" Grant proposed.

"Are you young people not aware it is quite dark at five o'clock?" said McLeod. "Let's be content with San Antonio for this afternoon."

"I did want to have mamma think we were lost!" said Gerty, regretfully. "Well, at anyrate we'll gallop on to San Antonio and wait for you there. I can't bear crawling."

"By Jove! Grant, they'll take you for a sailor!" said McLeod, with a laugh.

Christina looked after them as they clattered through Hamrung.

"How queer it is!" she said; "if my mother had been as fond of me as Gerty's I should have worshipped her, and Gerty only thinks it a bother!"

"It *does* bother her a bit, you know," said McLeod; "and she's been used all her life to see her father slight her mother."

"She always would have her own way, even as a little thing at school," said Christina.

"Because her father has half spoilt her," said McLeod, "and now Grant is going to complete it. Poor little soul!"

He would not say to a stranger what he had said to Lady Ruskin about Grant.

"She's fond of you," he went on, after a moment's hesitation; "couldn't you give her a hint to keep him in his place?"

A string of gocarts and *carrozzes* separated them and prevented Christina from answering.

When they met again she did not answer his question directly.

"Don't you think she is more lucky, after all, to have a chance of happiness, even with misery to come after, than if she had only a sort of dead level before her, without either one or the other?" she said.

She was so obviously thinking of herself that he answered her as if she had said so, with a certain amusement in his tone.

"Isn't there any happiness in the world unconnected with falling in love?" he said.

"Without falling in love?—perhaps, I hope so. But not without love of some kind. With most people there is somebody they love better than the rest of the world. Isn't there somebody like that for you?"

McLeod received a question about himself rather ungraciously as usual.

"If you want to make it a personal question," he said, "may I ask, don't you feel happy when you are writing?"

Christina's face brightened. "Ah, yes!" she said—"yes, I can shut out every outside thought. But don't you think if we went to the bottom of that happiness, it is love—because I love the people I am writing about?"

"No, I don't," said McLeod, in his bluntest manner. "It is because you are not thinking of yourself."

His plain speaking was always rather startlingly plain.

"I suppose you mean that I am frightfully selfish," said Christina, sharply.

McLeod started.

"I am sure I beg your pardon," he said. "I told you I wasn't fitted for society. I think that you are very, very fortunate to feel as you do about your writing."

"Fortunate!" said Christina. "When I've a broken promise on my conscience every time I write—when all I can do is to snatch at the chance of an odd time when George is out, do you think I am so fortunate?"

"Aren't you going to tell Stoddart?" said McLeod, very gravely.

They were walking their ponies along soberly side by side, and the others were quite out of sight.

"Do you think I ought to tell him?" said Christina.

"I have never been married," said McLeod; "you must know best."

"I shall, if there is any chance of a misunderstanding. I shan't keep the mystery up at the expense of everything, like people in a book," said Christina, with a laugh. "Don't you hate to read about misunderstandings which a single glimmer of sense on the part of anybody would clear up? What sort of an ending could be made out for us, do you think?"

"We should fall in love, unquestionably," said McLeod.

Christina had no intention of falling in love with McLeod, or of his falling in love with her; she liked him, but without any sentiment. He was scrupulously polite to her, and sometimes even friendly, but always she had a sensation of being held at arm's length, which was neither pleasant nor flattering.

Still she thought it was rather cool of him to speak as if anything but friendship was such an utterly impossible and ridiculous contingency.

She laughed and said that that was too obvious an ending to be artistic, and then suggested that they should trot.

McLeod lighted a cigarette, and they rode the rest of the way to San Antonio in silence.

P. P. C. and Fantoche were being walked up and down outside the garden by a couple of boys, and Grant and Gerty were discovered beside one of the fountains, teasing the goldfish by throwing little bits of stick to them. The goldfish were never enlightened by experience, and invariably, convinced that they had just been provided with a choice titbit, rushed in a body to secure shares. When they discovered that they had been again deluded, they appeared to lose their tempers and became quarrelsome at once.

McLeod had his pockets full of lumps of sugar for Nur-el-din, and one of them gave great satisfaction to the injured goldfish.

Then they walked about the garden, and Grant and Gerty got lost with the utmost promptitude.

Christina had been wondering ever since they started when McLeod was going to speak of her story, but it was not till they had walked round the garden and found a seat for themselves to wait for the others that he began.

Then he discussed it with her in a businesslike manner that filled her with pride and excitement. He talked of the characters as if they were real living people to him as well as to Christina; he made suggestions and gave her his opinion as to the changes necessary for putting the story on the stage, with a knowledge and love of his subject which she could appreciate, though she was completely ignorant of all professional technicalities.

She could not help saying: "I wonder very much you gave up the stage. Did you get a military madness?"

"I don't care for the army, and I never did," said McLeod, without volunteering an explanation; "acting was the one thing I ever had an enthusiasm for, though there are other things I should have liked—to live at home and go into the House, for instance, had matters been different."

"But you wouldn't have liked London life, surely," said Christina; "you would have had to go into society then."

"I don't admit that," said McLeod, drawing circles on the ground with the end of his whip; "but, in any case, would you be surprised to hear that I really like going out very well?"

Christina certainly was surprised, but she did not say so.

Instead, she suggested that it was quite time for them to start, especially if it was her duty as chaperon to see Gerty home; so they went to look for the others.

Nevertheless it was nearly dark when they reached Sliema, and they found Lady Ruskin in a state of much anxiety. She had already fluttered two or three times up and down the road to see if they were in sight, and had sent the butler some way toward Valetta.

Gerty was a little ruffled when her mother rushed out into the porch at the sound of their horses' feet.

"Mamma, how can you be so absurd!" she said. "Did you imagine I had eloped or broken my neck? We've had a most festive ride, and Mr. Grant is going to take me out in a gocart on Sunday. It's all right, I assure you—a go-cart is quite proper. He sits in front and I sit behind, with a rail between us!"

"The rail settles it!" said McLeod, laughing.

Gerty was by this time on the ground.

"And you're to bring me to tea on guard to-morrow, and we've planned lots of picnics. Get off, Chrissy; you must come in and have tea," said Gerty, all in a breath.

But Christina refused. It was already nearly dark, and she wanted to get home.

Grant asked McLeod what he meant to do, and finding that he was going to leave his ponies in Valetta, and have them sent down to meet him at the Marsa for polo next day, he decided to remain where he was and ride back to Pembroke.

So McLeod and Christina rode back together.

Christina was wondering to herself as they rode out of Sliema where the line of difference between Miss White and Gerty was drawn.

Was it her surroundings or her well-made dresses, her youth, and her pretty face that saved Gerty from Miss White's vulgarity and offensiveness? Or was it the inde-

finable difference in her way of doing and saying things that to some extent excused her?

She had plenty of time to think over it, for McLeod and she hardly talked at all on the way home.

They went by a short cut along a lane, which rather delayed them than otherwise, as they had to climb up and down a steep hill, and it was quite dark when they got to the Strada Mezzodi.

McLeod would not come in, so Christina said good-by and ran upstairs very cheerfully.

George was in the drawing room, for once not smoking, and, what was equally strange, he was to all appearance too engrossed in a book even to look up when his wife came in.

"Well, dear," said Christina, in a most amiable tone, "I hope you haven't been dull?"

He made no answer.

"I hope you haven't long been reduced to reading," said Christina, laughing. "What did you do all afternoon?"

"It is of very little consequence to you," said George, in a queer voice.

Christina stood still and stared at him.

"What on earth is the matter?" she said.

He got up and walked over to the fireplace, turning to face her with a very angry expression.

"Once for all, Christina," he said, "I won't stand it. What sort of an hour do you consider this to come in?"

"Six o'clock—my dear George!"

"Six o'clock, and black darkness, to be riding about with a fellow—not that I approve in the daytime."

"What difference does it make whether it is dark or daylight?" said Christina. "My good George, I am going to change my habit, and you must please have become sensible by dinnertime."

But in her heart there was a misgiving. Was he going to make even the slightest friendship with McLeod impossible by becoming jealous? And if he was so unreasonably ready to be jealous, was it because it was beginning to dawn upon him that his wife's feeling for him was nearer dislike than love?

What a pity it all was! In his own class, George might have made some nice girl very happy indeed, and been very happy himself. It was hard upon them both. Christina would have given all she possessed in the world for a hope of ever growing to care for George.

All her life she had longed so much for somebody to love and care for. Her mother and father had left very little opening for love; but at first she had given them a distant worship, which lasted till she found out how very differently all the other little girls she met were treated, and realized that it was not the custom for all fathers and mothers to be neglectful and indifferent.

Then she had transferred the first place in her affections to her governess, who had been very fond of her pupil, but later on had gone away and married, when, with babies of her own, her letters to Christina had gradually diminished in length and number.

At school she had had enthusiastic adorations for one or two girls—a worship which was generally unexpressed, and brought her much joy and misery.

A kindly word—a sign of friendship—on the part of one of her idols was enough to content her and keep her in a state of thrilling happiness for days, but it was equally easy to reduce her to complete misery.

After she left school came George, and that very hurried and very foolish marriage of hers; and then for three years and a half he had taken the highest place on the pedestal which must be raised for somebody, and she had been content with calmer friendships.

Now she felt very desolate indeed.

CHAPTER VI.

"Well, Jorrocks, what has happened?"

"Happened? I'll tell you: may I be d—d if he hadn't clean forgotten!"

There was a general outcry.

It was a cold afternoon at the end of January, and eight men had been waiting for the last half hour by the boat-house at Pembroke—waiting for McLeod, who was stroke, and who had himself arranged the practice.

They had been shivering and cursing freely.

Finally, Campbell had gone to see what had happened to the delinquent, and had returned in breathless indignation with the information that McLeod had completely forgotten them.

Everybody was cold and wrathful.

"The Lord knows what has come to him lately!" said Gordon. "Is he in love or has he taken to private drinks?"

"Ananias is an authority as to love," said Campbell.

"And Jorrocks here as to drink," retorted Grant, promptly.

"It's that show of his that's to come off at the Manoel," said Seton-Kerr.

"Perhaps he's shirking; its sure to be rough when we get out of the bay," suggested Campbell, by way of making a good joke.

"Seriously, he's not a bit like himself," said Gordon; "he's as right as a trivet one minute and frightfully down upon his luck the next."

"And how riled he was at mess last night with Grant about nothing at all," said McFerran, who was trying to warm his hands by clapping them together; "he's usually such an easygoing chap, nothing puts him out."

"He's down on his luck all round," said Campbell; "he was like this just after Beresford's death—do you remember? Awfully queer!"

"You're wrong about one thing," said McFerran, gravely; "as far as my memory helps me, it was not *after* Beresford's death, but *before*."

During the pause that followed McFerran's remark McLeod made his appearance, in great haste and full of apologies.

They rowed round to the quarantine harbour, getting a good tossing by the way, and there they came across a boatful of Rifles, also practising, and were invited ashore to the Manoel for refreshments.

McLeod seemed as full of the coming race as anybody.

If there were other things in his head, he put them aside resolutely.

He, like the rest, speculated as to whether the gunners or the Welsh were likely to bring off the victory, and half acknowledged to dire forebodings, due to the confoundedly good form those Maltee fellows showed.

Later on, when they were back at Pembroke, and he and Campbell were walking up to the messroom together, Campbell asked him about his "show at the Manoel."

"I hope all is going on wheels," he said.

"Far from it," said McLeod; "it's the very mischief to get everything to fit in. The two women's parts were what stumped me for ever so long."

"Why, the place is full of women," said Campbell, lighting a cigarette.

"But not, so far as I know, of women that can act," said McLeod. "If it hadn't been that some people I know very well—an actor and his wife called Bell—are coming out for his health, I needn't have attempted it. If I had asked some strange lady to personate a divorced woman, for all I know she might have screamed and fainted!"

"More likely have jumped at it," said Campbell.

"If she had, it might have been just as awkward, in case her acting had turned out a failure. I couldn't have got rid of her, probably she wouldn't have stood being coached, and our private interviews might have raised a scandal."

Campbell laughed.

"I see," he said. "The whole business bristles with difficulties."

"Bell's wife was on the stage till he married her, and is a fair actress," said McLeod. "Bell himself will do the stage management, I shall have a slight part as husband, and it will be easy to get a fellow or two as servants, and so on. But there's another woman wanted—the daughter who finds out her mother's history. I have been racking my brains over that."

"And——?"

"I am rather afraid of making the whole thing into a

farce," said McLeod, looking at Campbell, dubiously. "I am thinking, Jorrocks—thinking seriously—of turning you into a girl."

Campbell burst out laughing.

"There!" said McLeod, "I thought so. I suppose it won't do."

"Do!" said Campbell. "It's excellent—capital! What a pretty girl I shall make! Do you expect me to shave my flowing moustache and let my hair grow?"

"You can shave off the few hairs you call your moustache if you think they can be seen," said McLeod, with fine sarcasm.

Then he was silent, to allow Campbell time to think over his suggestion.

It had indeed been made quite as much for Campbell's sake as for the sake of the play. It would be a great thing if he could get him thoroughly interested in anything—better and more helpful than any amount of preaching temperance, and preaching of any kind was not in McLeod's line.

Football and smoking concerts had given him his first hold over his men.

"You must be chaffing," said Campbell; "it's all very well in a comic thing, when if you are awkward it's all the more amusing. But I should make a very queer sort of young woman in a tragedy. How on earth should I manage my legs or my petticoats?"

"You would have to learn, of course," said McLeod, quite seriously. "You can manage it, if you choose—at least I think so. You can act, if you will make up your mind not to play the fool."

"Good Lord—I couldn't!" said Campbell. "At least tell me you haven't to make love to me or anything of that sort."

"Great Scott, no, man! I'm your father!" said McLeod. "Think it over, my good chap, think it over, and make up your mind if you're prepared to work up your part well and take it seriously. I am in a crowd of difficulties. We can't possibly be ready before Lent begins, and then Mi-Carême is the only time we can choose, because the Bells are going on to Egypt before Easter."

McLeod wrinkled up his brows meditatively. He rather enjoyed difficulties.

"Then there's music. There's a break-down of Grant's——"

"What? In the middle of a tragedy?"

"Played slowly it's most awfully pretty and melancholy, and I don't see why it shouldn't be arranged for the band. I wish you would undertake that, and speak to Grant and the bandmaster."

"You will do it far better," said Campbell, "and you will have plenty of time now field training is over, even if you go to garrison class. I suppose you will?"

McLeod shook his head.

"Well, your majority isn't so very many years off, and you couldn't be stationed anywhere where there is less to do," said Campbell.

McLeod hesitated.

"I am thinking of sending in my papers," he said, slowly.

They had been walking very slowly, and Campbell now came to a dead stop.

"Bones!" he exclaimed, in utter consternation.

McLeod did not look at him.

"Why, all the better for you," he said; "a step will go in the regiment."

"D—n the step!" said Campbell, with great fervour; "what do you mean? You're just the fellow who ought to stick to the service. You have money enough, and everybody knows you are sure to get on. If it was a poor devil like me, now, who never has a penny to bless himself with, and who can't keep straight—but *you!*"

"Don't," said McLeod—"you don't understand."

"I certainly don't," said Campbell, vehemently. "I understand that there is not a man in this regiment, or as far as I know in any other, who is worshipped by the men as you are. You know not only your company, but the whole regiment would go through fire and water for you. If any fellow has a career before him it is you. You can't mean to be such a d—d fool!"

"You don't imagine I *want* to sit down for the rest of my life with my hands folded," said McLeod, bitterly.

"And with every chance of a row in Egypt——"

"My God!" said McLeod, in a very low voice, "if only that would come—in time!"

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTINA was in the drawing room with ink and paper and pens in front of her, but for once in her life she did not find it easy to concentrate her ideas.

George was disposed of on board ship for the next few hours, and there was no need to think of him. She had provided for him his favourite dinner, she had sewed buttons on his coat, and given a basketful of his socks to Caroline to mend; she had undoubtedly earned the right to forget him for a little.

But he *would* come uncomfortably between her and her hero, who was a thorough gentleman and very much in debt. This last item had been added to his troubles in remembrance of an annoying array of small bills which had sent George off that morning in an extremely bad temper.

Christina was beginning to realize that one's point of view with regard to bills altered very much when it was considered necessary to pay them.

But if she got money for her stories she could triumphantly clear them off herself, and then surely George would be content. She was rather inclined to look upon his dislike of debt as a praiseworthy but bourgeois weakness, and it still failed to trouble her personally.

George and she had been upon decidedly uncomfortable terms lately.

The debt trouble had been preceded the evening before by a much more serious one, about—nothing at all, in Christina's opinion.

Miss White had invited herself down to afternoon tea, and during the course of this she had casually informed George that she had christened Mrs. Stoddart's favourite canary "Andrew," after Captain McLeod.

This excellent joke, whether innocently made or not, scarcely seemed worthy of much attention, nevertheless, as soon as they were alone, it had given rise to enough bad language to send Christina indignantly out of the room.

McLeod's name had become, quite unreasonably, a sort of red rag to George.

Against her will, it was growing clear to her that her friendship with him would have to be dropped in the interests of peace.

Life in constant expectation of a quarrel was impossible—not that the quarrel was ever more than one-sided. If George became angry, she never retorted; if he used strong language, she went out of the room; she hardly ever disputed his fiat, and when she did it was with the utmost good humour; after any outbreak of temper on his part, she was always perfectly amiable and unreproachful next time they met. Could an angel behave better?

Was she not always ready to go out when she would much rather have stayed in, or to stay in when she wanted to go out, according to his wishes? Did she not decline Lady Eva's invitations because he was slighted, and, with the exception of the Ruskin-Boyds, devote herself entirely to his friends—even including the Whites? Was she not making up her mind to give up the only man she had cared to make a friend of in Malta?

What an unreasonable conscience she must have that would not be content with all this contemptuous kindness!

Certainly in this she might be wrong: she was beginning to think that a past deceit on George's part was little excuse for a present one on hers. Perhaps it was his right to be told that she had broken her promise, but at least she must wait for her explanation till his temper was a little less easily ruffled, and till this play of Captain McLeod's was over.

It would undoubtedly be very awkward to tell Captain McLeod that they must cease to be friends because her husband was causelessly jealous.

He had been so very kind. He had taken so much trouble to find Christina an agent in London to whom she could send her stories when they were written, and who could be trusted honestly to do his best to push them.

And they had become so intimate as the result of discussion over their play. They had discussed and disputed and grown hot and eager over it every time they had met for the last month, and even McLeod's reserve had not been able to resist the consequent intimacy.

Christina heard somebody admitted at the flat door, and hastily shoved away her papers and went to the glass to see if her hair was tidy and her collar straight. Then she re-established herself on the sofa in a more decorous if less comfortable position, took up a book, and was ready.

When she saw it was McLeod, her face brightened.

"Well?" she said, holding out her hand.

McLeod shook hands, and found himself a chair with his usual deliberation.

"I have brought you a letter to say that both your stories have been sent to publishers—not quite as good as being accepted, but still something," he said; "and I have left Campbell in dire trouble over his petticoats. Would you let him come to you for a hint some day?"

"Of course he can, but not this morning. I feel too depressed all round. Have you anything to recommend as good for low spirits?"

"When I feel that things are absolutely unbearable, I have a whisky and soda and a pipe, and go and play polo or take out the boat," said McLeod.

There was no being mistaken as to Christina's feelings; happiness made her completely pretty, depression showed itself in every line of her straight, young figure.

"I couldn't do any of those things," she said, "so I proceeded to make myself gloriously miserable for the fiftieth time over the Light that Failed; and then, when I stopped reading and tried to write, my hero proceeded to get himself into such a hideous muddle that I don't see any way out unless he follows Dick's example and commits suicide. I am glad you look less almighty and more friendly than usual."

"Let me help you with your hero," said McLeod; "there's a way out of most things."

"But there wasn't in Dick's case, was there? I was just reading about when he went blind, and they brought Maisie to see him."

McLeod nodded.

"I remember," he said.

"But if I had been Torpenhow I would have managed better," said Christina. "If they had shaved Dick and brushed his coat, it might have made all the difference. How *could* there be any romance about a man with a bristly inch of beard?"

"That's a poor sort of affection, surely," said McLeod.

Then after a pause he added gravely, more as if he was speaking to himself than to Christina: "He was lucky to find that way of ending his life. Do you think it was wicked?"

"No," said Christina, "of course I do not. Some lives get too hard to face."

"You understand that?" said McLeod, very seriously.

"But it is generally a woman's life. If I were a man—if only any amount of wishing could make me change places, for instance, with you——"

McLeod interrupted her with a sudden sharp exclamation.

"Don't say that!" he said, roughly. "Good God! you don't know what you are saying!"

He spoke as if he were afraid she might be taken at her word, and Christina was a little startled at his vehemence. When she had first met him she had been certain that something special had gone wrong with his life, and had speculated about it, but latterly, as she had come to know him in a commonplace way, the fancy had almost faded out of her mind.

"What a fool I am!" he said, after a long pause.

"I have often wished," said Christina, and they both understood her words as an answer, "that you would tell me something about yourself. I tell you all sorts of things, but you never tell me anything. Will you?"

McLeod was some time over his answer.

"I wish I hadn't said anything," he began, slowly. "I hate a fellow who makes a howl over his troubles. You have been so kind that if it would do any good I would tell you. But—I am afraid. To tell you the truth, I hate the thought of telling any one. If I did, it would change everything."

"You can't think much of me as a friend."

"It is just because I think so much of our friendship as it is that I don't want to make a change," said McLeod. "You couldn't help it. Only don't say anything like that again—like wishing to be me," he ended, earnestly.

He got up as he spoke, and held out his hand to say good-by. It seemed a matter of course that he should go just then.

Christina was left alone to wonder.

What had made him speak like that? She did not think he was a man to let a hysterical remorse for his friend's accidental death cloud his whole life. Unless—was it possible that Beresford's death was not in reality accidental?

On the Australia she had woven for herself a little romance to account for the sadness in McLeod's eyes. Supposing Beresford and he had cared for the same girl, might not a sudden temptation have come to McLeod a week before the marriage, leaving remorse behind it for the rest of his life?

But neither did this solution seem to her satisfactory.

She heard George's latchkey before she had found a better one, and hurriedly proceeded to find a safer refuge than the sofa cushion for her manuscript.

She prepared herself for more reproaches and perhaps an explosion when he heard of McLeod's visit, but George did not look angry.

He came forward, colouring a little and looking strangely shy.

"Kitty," he said, a little anxiously, "the violets and roses are lovely this morning. Would you care for a basketful? I told the fellow to send some round, and I brought you a little bunch myself."

Christina stared at him in amazement.

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE are very few people in the world who can be content to hug a trouble to themselves all their lives, without human sympathy.

To most there comes a time when some one must be told—when it is unbearable to be any longer out of touch with every human being; to whom confidence is given depends largely upon chance.

McLeod was a very reserved man. He had borne in absolute silence for ten years, and he had full confidence in his power to bear as long as it was necessary.

But one morning he woke up feeling he could stand it no longer. He must tell somebody.

That somebody semed naturally to be Mrs. Stoddart.

He thought of Campbell, but to a man it would have been harder to speak; he thought of Lady Ruskin, but she was engrossed with her daughter.

There was only Christina left.

What right had he to bother her with his trouble? None; but then there was no one in the world to whose sympathy he had a right. And the thing must be said.

McLeod, having realized this, and realized that only to Christina did he feel it possible to speak, asked himself no more questions.

He rode into Valetta as soon as he could get away from barracks, and went straight to Strada Mezzodi.

The Stoddarts were on the roof. George and Miss White had organized a joint and chilly tea party there, and invited a few kindred spirits.

Perhaps, if he had not been shown up as a matter of course, McLeod would not have faced it, but more probably, having once made up his mind, he would.

But after he had politely drunk a cup of tea, he drew Christina away from the others, not unwillingly.

Since his last outbreak, now several days ago, George had been very much on his good behaviour, and he was also for the moment very well amused and very happy.

McLeod and Christina crossed the roof, and stood side

by side looking down into the street, a little apart from the others.

"The other day," said McLeod, "you asked me to tell you about myself. Well, I should like to tell you something to-day, if I may."

"If you may!" said Christina—"of course you may."

"It isn't a very amusing story," said McLeod.

He swung himself up on the low parapet, sitting with his face towards the street for a few minutes of silence.

Then he turned and faced Christina.

"Mrs. Stoddart," he said, "would you mind—it's just a fancy of mine—looking at me while I tell you? Did you ever know any one with a mortal disease—any one who could do nothing but wait and wait, and feel every day worse than the day before?"

"Never."

"I am condemned to worse than that. You wouldn't notice much difference between me and other fellows? Well, they've all something to look forward to, and—have you ever been over a lunatic asylum?—that is what I have before me."

Christina knew that she started.

They were practically alone. She could just see George and Miss White, at the other side of a tall chimney, amusing themselves with the engrossing pastime of trying to play knucklebones with bits of lime, and she could hear them laugh and a murmur of their words.

"I am going mad," said McLeod, distinctly. He found a certain odd satisfaction in saying the words out brutally.

Instinctively Christina shrank back.

He gave a short, bitter laugh.

"There's no need to be afraid," he said.

She answered impulsively.

"I should not be afraid to be anywhere with you. But I am so sorry—so terribly sorry."

There was a long silence. McLeod was restlessly picking little bits of mortar off the wall, and, obviously unconscious of what he was doing, throwing them down into the street below. Christina found herself anxiously watching over the unconscious sentinel, and wondering how much longer he would escape.

McLeod was again the first to speak, fashioning his sentence boyishly.

"It is rather hard lines, isn't it?" he said.

"It is the cruelest thing I ever knew," said Christina.

"It has come between me and everything. My one idea from the time I was old enough to have an idea was to go on the stage, and I loved the life even from the first. But a year after I had got my way came an illness, and they told me I must give it up and sent me to Wolfram's to cram for the army. But they never told me the truth—I suppose they meant to be kind—not till after Beresford's death. I forced it out of my mother then."

Christina started.

"You may have heard the others speak of Beresford," McLeod said, "and perhaps how he was killed. But none of them know the truth. It is a terrible thing to have the murder of your best friend on your soul, even though you did not know what you were doing."

Christina drew a long breath of horror. It seemed terrible to stand here, only a few yards away from a cheerful, careless party, and hear the tragedy of a man's life.

How did he live his life and talk and laugh like other people with this thing always in his mind?

She drew a little nearer to him with an impulse of sympathy.

"All I can do now," said McLeod, "is to wait. Every morning when I wake up I wonder—will it come to-day? And every night I ask myself, have I spent my last day as an equal among sane men? But I suppose it will come more gradually."

"I shall feel it as an honour—always—that you have told me," said Christina, softly, "but I feel so useless. If I could only help you!"

"Will you be always afraid to be alone with me now?" said McLeod, giving her a long look. "Of course you will, and of course you'll say you will not. Don't you see that it is hard to tell what makes one—however kind people may be—into a sort of pariah."

"Try me," said Christina—"try me, and see if I am not always glad and proud to be with you."

"Thank you for saying that," said McLeod. Then he saw how white her face had grown.

"I have been a brute to tell you this," he said. "I shall never forgive myself if you worry over what can't be helped. Mrs. Stoddart, I really am trying to face it like a man, and you have helped me."

"I don't believe it can be hopeless—it can't be hopeless!" said Christina, with pain in her voice. She was so sorry for him, so dreadfully sorry.

"Well," said McLeod, "it has come twice, and once again—very nearly."

He saw himself back in underground Valetta, with a native by the throat, and the joy of crushing—crushing!—out a man's life. What would have been the end of it if he had not saved himself by a sudden blind instinct of flight?

As he moved the sunshine fell full upon his face, and there came a sudden look into his eyes which startled Christina. Would she in future ever be able to help watching him furtively?

Before either of them spoke again, George and Miss White came up.

"Do let me teach you to play knucklebones, Captain McLeod," said Miss White, in her most jovial tones.

CHAPTER IX.

"I MUST get an old gentleman for mamma," said Gerty, nodding her pretty head meditatively.

She had ordered her mother to bring her to the Manoel Theatre to see a burlesque performed by the Berkshire.

To Lady Ruskin there was a ring of impropriety about the very name of the Manoel, and her consent, even on this special occasion, had been reluctantly wrung from her. Fortunately, Aladdin as a burlesque did not afford much opening for the mildest impropriety, and the Berkshire

had no desire to shock their friends and admirers, and had only engaged the Manoel because of its convenient size.

McLeod had dined at Sliema and come with the Ruskins, and at the end of the first act Grant and a number of other men had come up.

Gerty was rather a success in her way; she was amusing and she was very easily amused. And men are given to follow each other after a somewhat sheeplike fashion. So, one or two having set the example, quite a group had now congregated.

The little box was only supposed to hold four, and that with no room to spare, but the rest had established themselves in the open doorway, thereby admitting a draught which Lady Ruskin found by no means agreeable.

She had been talking to McLeod, and was roused by Gerty's last remark in her clear young voice.

She remonstrated feebly as usual.

"What *are* you talking about, Gerty dear?" she said, in consternation.

"Nothing, mamma," said Gerty. "I was only saying that I must look out an old gentleman to drive with you. We are going to have a big picnic, either to Musta valley or right away to Boschetto. We have all got to find somebody to ride with, and you are to drive and bring the provisions."

"Miss Ruskin-Boyd wants everybody to bring something," said Campbell, in explanation. "I am ready to undertake anything, and I have been able honestly to recommend Grant for *paté de foie* sandwiches."

"Who has got a bit of paper?" said Gerty, eagerly; "I want to put everybody down. Mamma, we can bring the teacups and cream and cakes. Mr. Campbell, I'll put you down for jam; Mr. Grant, sandwiches——"

"Supposing each couple brought something between them?" suggested Campbell.

"What a very matrimonial arrangement!" Gerty exclaimed.

Then everybody laughed, and she suddenly blushed furiously.

"I don't see what there is matrimonial about *sandwiches*, for example," said Campbell.

Gerty recovered her normal colour and her tongue very promptly.

"We must have Mrs. Stoddart to ride with Andrew," she said, "but the question is, who on earth are we to get to ride with Mr. Stoddart?"

"What is all this planning about, my dear child?" said Lady Ruskin, mildly. "I haven't heard anything of this picnic before."

"If I am not to go out in Lent, I intend to vanish with a flourish of trumpets," said Gerty; "we are going to have a great afternoon. Papa shall provide lots of champagne, and we are going to take three banjos and two guitars and a zither. If we go to Boschetto, wouldn't you like us to stop and dine with you at Civita Vecchia on the way back, Mr. Seton-Kerr?"

Mr. Seton-Kerr said he should be charmed, but looked rather dismayed, as he well might, money with him being by no means too plentiful.

Then the next act began, and there was a general departure from the box.

Grant remained, taking the fourth seat in a matter-of-course way.

Lady Eva Wrench was just opposite, but it never occurred to him to go and speak to her. His way of doing things was always complete: when he devoted himself to a girl and when he dropped her he went in for no half measures, after the fashion of less courageous people.

He leaned forward to talk to Gerty in a low voice, bringing with him a whiff of scent, and bending his smooth, close-cropped head conspicuously near to hers.

He would have given an indignant denial if any one had accused him of behaving badly to either Lady Eva or Gerty.

He had not made love to them, certainly not—that is to say, not seriously. He had not said a word which could be so construed, and he constantly deplored his poverty. It was not his fault if either failed to understand clearly that he could not afford to marry.

So he gazed tenderly into Gerty's eyes, and made the most of their necessary proximity, without being troubled

by any prickings of conscience. It was only a pleasant episode, and he had gone through so many similar ones.

But Gerty's radiant look brought an ache to her mother's heart.

It was pitiful or amusing, according to the onlooker, to see how desperately Lady Ruskin strove to make Grant talk to her, and with what undisguised indignation Gerty viewed her attempts.

Grant saw it all and was amused.

In public the attention seemed to be chiefly on Gerty's side—how it was in private was another matter.

As for Gerty, she did not think at all—she was content to be happy. If she had considered the matter, she would have been quite sure that everything would go on comfortably just as it was, and that, whatever happened, nothing could interfere with her friendship and Mr. Grant's. He was undoubtedly her property; he had neither words nor thoughts for anybody else, and he had been very much annoyed because she had danced three dances running with Mr. Campbell at the admiral's the other night.

When the play was over, who could have been more attentive than he was? He put on her cloak, made her hold by his sleeve to keep them together on the way downstairs, and was much annoyed when a man stepped on her dress and tore the flounce.

McLeod attended to Lady Ruskin, whose one idea was to hurry as quickly as possible after her daughter.

Grant and Gerty had had the grace to wait at the theatre door, and here Lady Ruskin surprised herself and McLeod by taking quite a decided step.

"Good-night, Mr. Grant," she said.

"I am coming to see you over the ferry, if I may," said Grant.

"Oh, thank you; I couldn't think of troubling you," said Lady Ruskin, with unwonted firmness. "Andrew will see us home. Good-night. Come, Gerty dear."

"But it is on his way——" Gerty began, indignantly.

"Grant is going to the club," said McLeod, decidedly. "Gerty, don't keep your mother waiting in the cold."

Gerty lingered ostentatiously in her farewell. Then she

walked to the ferry, a little behind the other two, in stony, rebellious silence.

She had been looking forward to crossing the bay in the moonlight all evening, and now—it was too selfish, too unkind of her mother!

What a miserable girl she was, and how cruelly she was treated!

Nobody cared for her pleasure—nobody minded if she was disappointed—except Mr. Grant.

She answered her mother's timid, apologetic attempts at conversation with stern monosyllables.

When they reached home she gave McLeod a brief and ungracious good-night and ran upstairs.

Lady Ruskin drew McLeod into the morning room.

"Andrew," she said, "what am I to do? How am I to stop this? If Mr. Grant goes to Lord Ruskin, he will laugh at him—I know he will, though I can't get him to interfere now."

"Grant won't go to Lord Ruskin," said McLeod. "Cousin Amy, he is one of those fellows who consider that so long as they don't actually propose to a girl they are clear of all responsibility."

McLeod spoke indignantly; he was very angry with Grant.

Lady Eva had been able to take care of herself, but this child—his own cousin—was different.

That afternoon, riding from Sliema to Valetta by the short cut, he had come upon Grant and Gerty together, and Campbell bore witness to having interrupted an interview, which might or might not have been accidental, at the library, and another, of all places in the world, at Jenkins the dentist's.

"I am afraid people must—talk," said Lady Ruskin, with hesitation.

"I am afraid they do," said McLeod.

"And of course it *looks* as if it was my fault," said Lady Ruskin, piteously; "but I can't keep her at home when invitations come, and wherever we go we meet Mr. Grant; and how am I to prevent her from speaking to him? Perhaps in Lent, as we shall not be going out——"

"I am not sure that that won't be worse," said McLeod; "you see, she will have no one else to think of——"

"You are a Job's comforter, my dear," said Lady Ruskin, with a troubled little sigh.

"After all," she began again, "it would be a bad match; but if the child's heart is set on it——"

McLeod sighed. How could he make her understand without brutality that in his opinion Grant was the last man in the world to wish to marry a girl who was practically penniless?

"Then there are the masked balls. Gerty has been talking about them already."

"That's all right," said McLeod. "No English officers are to be asked on any consideration whatever. Grant told me so himself. He went to Zorab's this morning to try and get an invitation. It's rather a joke, too, for he and five or six others have got their dominos and masks all ready!"

Lady Ruskin heaved a sigh of relief.

It was the one small crumb of comfort which McLeod was able to give her.

After he had gone she went upstairs slowly, and made a pause full of hesitation at Gerty's door before she decided to knock.

Gerty had begun to unfasten her dress; she had sent her maid to bed after her thick fair hair had been brushed and arranged for the night.

She faced round upon her mother with eyes full of reproach, and a manner and attitude which was clearly meant to express that she was waiting impatiently to know what on earth Lady Ruskin could want.

"I came in, Gerty," said her mother, timidly, "to ask you about this picnic."

"Oh, it doesn't matter at all," said Gerty, in the voice of a martyr; "I suppose you disapprove. Of course, it can easily be given up."

"My dear, I don't want you to give it up at all—why should I? Let us plan about it, Gerty. I am quite willing to do my best."

Gerty was irresponsive.

"I think it will be better if we provide the tea alto-

gether," Lady Ruskin went on, "don't you? And after Lent we might have a dance in the house. I am sure papa wouldn't mind."

"*Papa* always wants me to have a good time," said Gerty, with a slight, reproachful emphasis on her father's name.

"And I suppose I don't?" said Lady Ruskin, with laboured playfulness. "We could have a very good dance in this house, couldn't we? And the weather will be warmer."

In spite of herself, Gerty's eyes brightened. It was very difficult to keep up her just indignation in face of a dance.

"I should like it," she admitted, almost cordially.

Then Lady Ruskin proceeded to spoil her success as she always did.

She never managed to choose a judicious moment for remonstrance.

"And don't you think, darling, it would be better for you to ride with some one else to the picnic? It's better to make a change, you know."

Gerty stiffened promptly.

"Ride with some one else? I don't see why I should give up riding with Mr. Grant just because you have taken a prejudice against him."

Lady Ruskin sighed heavily.

"When shall I be able to convince you that I am able to take care of myself!" said Gerty, with dignity.

CHAPTER X.

GERTY came into the drawing room in a very pretty pink frock, with a burnt straw hat trimmed to match, and a brown coat and shoes and sunshade.

She looked very pretty and fresh and obstinate.

"Mamma," she said, "I am going in to Valetta."

Lady Ruskin's work had been relegated to a bedroom

drawer as hideous, her songs had been condemned, and she found time hang rather heavily on her hands. She was reading over the fire, and looked up from her book to view her daughter with mingled admiration and misgiving.

"Are you, dear?" she said. "I will go in with you."

"Now, mamma, why should you?" said Gerty, impatiently. "It's a cold afternoon, and you know you hate crossing the ferry, and you would never have time to dress for the opera this evening. Do you imagine I am not capable of going to the Strada Reale to buy ribbon by myself?"

"Take Agatha with you, then," suggested Lady Ruskin, without much hope.

"I can't go about Strada Reale with a maid trapesing after me," said Gerty, bringing down the point of her sunshade vigorously upon the carpet, not in anger, but to show that her decision was unshakable. "You know other girls don't. There's Eva Wrench——"

"She is a good deal older than you are," said Lady Ruskin, apologetically. She did not by any means consider Lady Eva a desirable model.

Gerty tossed her head.

"I can't and won't take Agatha," she said.

Lady Ruskin looked at her helplessly. All her children had had their father's strong will in the merest trifles; all of them had invariably taken their own way, and with this youngest one she felt least of all able to cope. She felt so old, so worn-out, to be the mother of a child like Gerty.

A note for Miss Ruskin-Boyd had come in at lunch that day, which Gerty had received with a fine blush and a defiant look at her mother, as if daring her to ask any questions.

Lady Ruskin was observant where her child was concerned, and uncomfortably connected the note with her present wish to go into Valetta. Grant's name was seldom if ever mentioned between them.

Gerty had pulled on one glove, and she began to button it.

"I shall go to see Chrissy Stoddart," she said.

"You were there a few days ago," said Lady Ruskin.

Gerty fired up at once. "I think it is rather hard that

you should want to prevent my seeing the only girl I like in Malta," she said.

Personally, Lady Ruskin had found Christina pleasant. She would have been only too thankful that Gerty should make her a friend had circumstances been different. But almost necessarily Mrs. Stoddart must see something of her husband's friends, and did Gerty once get entangled with this set, there was no saying, with such an uncontrollable young woman, what might happen.

"You must ask Chrissy to dinner on the 18th," Gerty said.

"But, Gerty dear——"

"Oh, I know her husband is an awful outsider. But she——"

"I can't ask her to dinner without asking him, you see, dear."

"I am sure she wouldn't mind," said Gerty; "she would be only too glad to get away."

"But I don't think it would be doing her any great kindness to separate her from her husband."

"Well, I do hate snobbishness," said Gerty; "if I were she I would not stay with the man another hour, I know that! I should go off with the first available person—Andrew or anybody. In any case I am going to tea with Chrissy this afternoon."

Which somewhat inconsistent and involved remark left Lady Ruskin with only strength to call after her daughter feebly an entreaty to be home before dark.

It must be in some way her fault that Gerty was so entirely disrespectful and disobedient. Ought she not, on this and on many other occasions, have gathered courage to put a distinct veto on Gerty's proceedings, though by doing so she might throw away the last hope of making the child fond of her? But, then, supposing Gerty refused to obey, or betook herself to her father, who was absolutely certain to say the opposite thing? Then matters would only have been made worse. If trouble came of all this, everybody, including Gerty herself, would be certain to say that Lady Ruskin was to blame. What could she do?

But there was never a trouble in Gerty's pretty head as she walked up Strada Reale to the library.

She had no time to think. It was quite joy enough to be alive, to have something amusing to look forward to every day, and the handsomest and smartest man in Malta —in her opinion and his—as the first victim of her bow and spear. She even found a little private exhilaration in the idea of being talked about by the Valetta world in connection with such a glorious individual.

She had been in the reading room for about ten minutes, and had exchanged whispers with a half dozen girls of her acquaintance, when Grant put in his head.

According to custom, everybody looked up with a single impulse.

He came across to Gerty's sofa at once.

He rather enjoyed his saunter through the room in full observation, and his consciousness that everybody understood the whole matter as well as he and Gerty did.

People were probably speculating how long this new attachment of his would last, and whether Gerty really cared. He knew they said already that the way she was behaving was scandalous—very bad form—extraordinary that her mother should allow it.

Gerty was engrossed in the Malta Chronicle, with a little affectation of not having seen Grant till he was close beside her.

"Great Scott!" she said, "*you!* You needn't imagine your note had anything to say to my coming; I was coming in any case."

It was necessary, by the rules of the reading room, to speak in a whisper.

"Of course," said Grant, softly. "I only hoped for the chance. It brought me in all the way from Pembroke."

"That was very silly of you," said Gerty. "Are you coming to dinner on the 18th?"

"Of course I am," said Grant, reproachfully; "and are *you* coming to tea at Bizzazza's with me now?"

"I don't know," said Gerty, shaking her head. "I have just found a delightful Chaperon's Catechism in the Chronicle, which is beginning to make clear to me the mazes of Malta etiquette, and I haven't come to afternoon tea yet. Look, here's the first question:

"'*Ques.* Is it correct for a lady and gentleman to drive

without a chaperon? *Ans.* Yes, provided they drive tandem.

"'*Ques.* Is a gocart safer than a dogcart for driving *à deux? Ans.* Safer, but not so comfortable.'

"I always felt it was safer," Gerty added, parenthetically.

"We'll buy a copy of the paper, and you shall make your mother learn it and repeat it every Sunday," said Grant.

"The riding regulations are better still. Listen to this:

"'Is it correct for a lady and gentleman to ride alone? *Ans.* Yes, provided they start with a party.

"'*Ques.* At a picnic, if a couple do not put in an appearance all day, is the chaperon exonerated if they say they lost their way? *Ans.* Certainly.'

"But I don't see anything about tea at Bizzazza's."

"Never mind," said Grant; "what there is of it ought to be printed in letters of gold. But I didn't come here for you to read the paper to me, Miss Ruskin-Boyd. I've got a bit of news for you. I've got my company at last."

"Ah!" said Gerty, "I noticed you had begun to wax your moustache again after all I said, and I suppose that is your excuse."

"I assure you," said Grant, earnestly, "it is only soap. Don't I always do what you ask? Won't you congratulate me?"

"Of course I will, and I shall begin trying to call you Captain Grant from this minute. I shall *never* get used to it!"

"You may call me anything in the wide world that you like," said Grant, tenderly.

But there he stopped, without proceeding further to particularize.

He was a very discreet young man.

Gerty being an equally indiscreet young woman, they went to Bizzazza's and had tea there together, a proceeding against all the edicts of Malta society.

In the middle Grant took out his watch, and said he had to go and call on the Bells, and it was a horrid bother.

As a preliminary, he escorted Gerty to the Stoddarts',

and had a tender parting with her inside the great outer door. He could not very well go to their flat, he said, and insinuated that the cause was a misplaced attachment on Mrs. Stoddart's part, which he had found it necessary to nip in the bud. He really by this time believed that this was the cause of the coolness between them.

He asked Gerty very anxiously when he should see her again. Could he be useful as escort on carnival days? He was down for duty on Monday, but, if so, he would manage to exchange. Might he send her flowers for the palace ball?—holding her hand lingeringly in his meanwhile.

And though, when Gerty went upstairs, Christina remembered McLeod's words to her during their first ride, and tried to suggest a little wisdom, and a doubt of Grant, what chance had her words against his?

CHAPTER XI.

McLEOD having once made up his mind, and spoken to Christina about himself, would not acknowledge to himself that he regretted it, but it was certainly a fact that for the succeeding fortnight he took some trouble to avoid her entirely.

He felt unreasonably inclined to resent that she knew so much about him, and that she had heard him speak so freely. It made everything harder and not easier.

He could not bear to feel that she might look upon him as an object for pity and curiosity—some one apart from other men, to be treated more kindly, and perhaps furtively watched.

He had seen and noted as a child how his mother had watched his brother—with what an agony of anxiety. He had pitied him for it then, but Drumesk himself had been rather proud of the attention of his family. He found himself an exceedingly interesting person, and was looked upon by his little sisters with a kind of awed envy.

It was not every little boy who had fits, who had once

even bitten his tongue through, and who was not allowed to learn lessons because it excited him.

But, even then, Andrew had never envied his notoriety.

Later on, Andrew had gone to Eton and Drumesk had stayed at home, and been taught a little sometimes with his sisters.

And Andrew had gradually grown to understand why his mother watched his brother with such a desperate anxiety, why she was never content when he was not with her, and why her whole life was one anxious stretch of watching and waiting.

She was a foolish, excitable woman—a woman whose mind since her marriage had been crushed down by a great overmastering dread.

There was a little sister who had been strange, too, and who had died, and two girls who seemed like others, but who their mother watched always.

It was she and the blood in her veins that had brought the curse upon these children, and she knew that all had not escaped.

Their father had died when his eldest son, who had been such a bitter disappointment to him, was ten years old.

Drumesk had come of age with much rejoicing and many festivities; his mother had even begun to gather hope, and talk of marriage as a possibility for him, when the fear which had been hanging over him all his life turned to a certainty, and it became necessary to separate him from among sane men, and send him to spend the rest of his life as an outcast.

He was very unhappy—his life was a misery and a burden to him; he had tried again and again to end it.

When his mother came to see him, he would neither look at her nor speak to her, and her uncontrolled grief moved him to frenzy.

Andrew had gone to see him once, and Drumesk had greeted him with civility, and proceeded to explain to him how inconveniently he was troubled with a raging inward fire, which was gradually consuming him away, and which made it necessary for him sometimes to keep his lips closed for weeks together to prevent a general conflagration.

It was terrible, he said, in such a sad, sad voice, to

feel himself a danger to everybody round him, but if his brother could contrive to set him free, even for an hour, he could find a remedy—he knew he could.

His frenzy of utter despair, when, with his brother, his last hope left him, haunted Andrew for years.

Andrew himself put the curse as much as possible out of his mind.

He said no word, except to his mother, to hinder his sisters' marriages; but though he believed that he would escape, he was determined that through him it should never descend to others.

Till Beresford's death his life had been by no means unhappy.

It came about in this way: Beresford was in command of a company stationed at Ballater, and McLeod, having been for some time depressed and seedy and sleepless, had got a fortnight's leave, and come to stay with him for shooting, intending to remain for his wedding.

Beresford had been extremely anxious to introduce his friend to his fiancée. They had driven over to her father's place, some twenty miles from Ballater, had stayed there all night, spent next day on the moors, and returned to barracks in high spirits.

Beresford's subalterns had exchanged some joking remarks with them, and they had then gone to their rooms, with the avowed intention of cleaning their guns before dinner.

Not half an hour afterward the two subalterns heard a shot, and rushed upstairs with a common impulse.

Beresford had fallen across a table, the cleaning rod he had been using still in his hand. McLeod was standing a little distance off, unconsciously holding his smoking gun, with such a look of awful horror on his face that the young fellow who had gone into the room first started back instinctively.

No one doubted that it was an accident—one of those foolishly common gun accidents recorded daily and uselessly in the papers. Next to the girl who was to lose her lover, and the mother who had been sent for to see her son die, people pitied McLeod.

Beresford was a strong young man, and he had a hard struggle for life—he was desperately anxious to live.

He lingered through ten days of agonizing torture, keeping his senses by sheer effort of will, and never losing hope and courage for the first week. Then there came a day when he turned his face to the wall, and wished for nothing, not even for the touch of the girl he loved, nothing but that an end should come to this awful pain.

McLeod went through the inquest and the funeral in a stunned, indifferent way. He did not seem, even to himself, to mind very much just at first.

Was it an accident? Desperately he tried to convince himself that it was—that that sudden, blind impulse of furious madness had never been.

Beresford had had no doubts. In the greatness of his pain his thoughts had never been very clearly collected, and he had loyally and undoubtingly set down everything that puzzled him to this.

It must be, McLeod told himself, another delusion of that black horrible depression he had been struggling to throw off for weeks.

In his heart, he *knew*.

Back to his mind came that old strange illness of his.

As the stunned feeling merged into pain, the pain seemed to grasp such a hold of his life as to make it clear that he must know all there was to know.

He went to his mother and drew from her all particulars about that illness ten years before.

Even then, even when he knew that for a month he had been a dangerous madman, hope did not absolutely leave him—it is so hard for a strong man of thirty to crush out hope.

To his mother he said nothing about Beresford's death. What she heard and suspected he could only guess.

A few months later she died, not unwillingly. She died of no specific disease recorded in a medical book, but simply because a lifelong strain of fear and anxiety had worn her out, body and soul.

But Andrew could not solve the problem of his life so easily and satisfactorily.

He was nearly thirty years old, strong, clever, and entirely steady.

He had done his best, with some failures, to lead his life after the fashion that he thought right.

He was a man of strong passions, but with a will which was stronger still.

Was it possible that by the injustice of God this restraint had hastened the falling of the curse?

This was a dangerous thought—a thought that, if he resigned himself to a life of inaction, would be sure to come again, and to come well supported.

McLeod had hated the army at first, but he threw his heart into everything he did, and in the eight years since he had passed his final examination he had grown to take an interest in his profession.

But was it right for him to go on living as a free man? Was it safe for others?

For once in his life he hesitated long.

Was he to wreck his career utterly on such a chance?

Could it by any possibility be his duty—as sane as other men—to give himself up to lifelong imprisonment?

Perhaps that dreadful, crushing melancholy, that desperate impulse, would never come again.

In a year life had almost become bearable. Then came that day in underground Valetta, and he had realized the hopelessness of the struggle.

In the last few months the nights of sleeplessness, the unconquerable depression, had come back to him.

Could he hold out till first leave? There were faint rumours of war in Egypt as a temptation.

It would be much easier to send in his papers and resign himself to worse than death if he were not among all the fellows. What an outcry they would make, and how they would wonder and speculate—just possibly, credibly, approach the truth!

No, he must hold out by strength of will, and if he could not conquer, he could surely at least resist for another month or two.

The terrible temptation to take his own life he recognised as part of the disease, and he would fight against it—at least as long as the faintest gleam of hope remained.

CHAPTER XII.

"ONCE for all, Christina, I won't have this house made into a lounging place for all the regiments in Malta!"

"Eh?" said Christina, looking up from her book, "of course not—if you mean this *flat*. I don't think Miss White will approve if you interfere with their lounging upstairs."

Intentionally she spoke in a tone of provoking indifference.

George looked so very plain as he sat over the fire in his after-dinner costume of a shabby old checked coat, a waistcoat which did not match and was unbuttoned down the front, and gray trousers which had wriggled up so as to expose a certain amount of hairy red leg above his socks. He had been so very tiresome all day. He had insisted upon going to call at the palace, and had there made himself particularly loud and obnoxious, and he had smoked a pipe all the way down Strada Reale on the way home. He had an exceedingly noisy cold in his head, and had been clearing his throat and sniffing and sneezing all day. Of course, this was not exactly his fault; but Christina did think he might have managed to sniff a little less frequently and aggressively, and to sneeze in a less startling manner.

She had devoted herself to her book, and carefully omitted to observe that he was anxious to attract her attention.

Now that he had finally spoken to her directly, she lay back in her chair and looked up at him with an aggravating smile. It had been quite impossible to please him, do what she might all day, and now she was not going to try.

"You know what I mean very well," he said, sharply. "Why, yesterday evening when I came in the drawing room was full of men, and this morning there was that chap Campbell again in an idiotic white frock."

"He was only practising for the play, dear," said Christina, after the manner of soothing an unreasonable child.

"I should like to know what you have got to do with their play," said George.

Christina smiled to herself.

"I did think you would have thought little Mr. Camp-

bell safe," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "What do you want me to do, George? Can't you explain to Caroline whom you consider safe acquaintances for me?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk to me like that, Kitty," said George, sniffing and clearing his throat energetically and simultaneously. "I am talking to you for your good. I don't think it is the thing for a lady——"

"Oh, don't!" said Christina, with energy.

Never, never she hoped would she attain George's ideal of a lady's conduct.

"When I see that you prefer talking to other men——" said George again.

"When do you see that?" said Christina, sitting very upright—"I ask you in fairness, when? Am I not always ready to talk to you and to do what you want? I am not going to be insulted by this absurd jealousy any longer, George, and these silly accusations about nothing at all."

"What do you mean?" he began, with excitement, and then he was interrupted by a violent outbreak of sneezing, which unreasonably raised Christina's indignation several points.

"I mean that if you can't or won't help me to make our life together as bearable as possible, there is no reason we should remain together," she said.

George's ruddy face paled suddenly.

"I—I don't understand you, Kitty," he said, blankly; "our life—*bearable!* Did you say—*bearable?*"

Christina's quick sympathy was roused by the dismay in his face.

"I don't mean to be unkind," she said, softening her voice. But she would not retract her words. She said to herself it was quite necessary that they should be spoken some time.

George said no more. He pulled his chair closer to the fire and lighted his pipe, spending the rest of the evening in a puzzled meditation, from which not even Christina's suggestion of halma or patience was able to rouse him.

When they were going to bed he surprised her very much.

"Kitty," he said, with much hesitation, "if you really like, I will change for dinner."

Christina, who was putting out the standing lamp, turned round in surprise.

"Change for dinner? Oh, don't bother about it," she said, indifferently.

"But I will. And did you mean what you said about our life being—*bearable?* Kitty, I thought we were very happy——"

"If you will stop scolding me, it will be all right," said Christina, with a faint smile. "I do my best, really, George; it is not our fault that we are absolutely incongruous people."

George gave her a long, puzzled look, and turned away with a heavy sigh.

Christina was a little troubled; he had never looked at her like that before. Was it possible that his armour of vanity and self-esteem was not so impenetrable as she had imagined?

As she brushed out her thick light hair that night, with a book on her knee that she was not reading, she wondered would Captain McLeod have approved of her plain speech. Would he have admitted it to be only a proper assertion of her rights as a woman, or would he have again accused her of selfishness?

At first, fresh from that talk with him on the roof, all the little rubs and crosses of her life had seemed to her so infinitesimal, so completely endurable. But unfortunately, in the fortnight that followed, they had returned to their usual proportions. At first she had felt as if she could never again let George's little vanities and coarsenesses trouble her seriously, and she had been disappointed to find herself mistaken.

The desire to be of some help to McLeod had driven out all idea of giving up his friendship, and had given her a new interest and excitement in life.

But when a fortnight had passed without his making an effort to see her again, she began to feel that her sympathy would probably not be acceptable. She had thought at one time of writing to invite him to call or to ride, but she had decided against this. She would not have done it had he been exactly as other men, and she felt he might realize this and resent pity.

Perhaps he was busy. The regiment had moved into Valetta a few days before, and established themselves in barracks at the Auberge de Baviar. Naturally there must have been a good deal for the officers to do.

Christina would have liked a talk with him, to take her out of herself.

Somehow things seemed to have been becoming specially unendurable lately. George was always either offended or, what was worse, inclined to be unpleasantly caressing. If he saw her talking to any one, especially to any man, he always made himself a third, and would afterward demand an account of the conversation preceding his arrival. Christina could not help an uncomfortable feeling that no man, however much inclined towards jealousy, would give way to it with such absolute unreason did he not feel his wife was utterly indifferent to him.

But it was very hard for a young woman, at no time given to meekness, to bear.

Sometimes, as this evening, she felt moved with all her strength to hate him, and would clinch her teeth together to restrain the temptation to unkind or bitter words.

She wondered to herself would her plain words, spoken at last, have any effect on George, or would he by next morning have put them aside, and be as satisfied with himself and his relations to his wife as ever.

She was not prepared for the effect they did have.

George had to be on the Dauntless early in the morning, and he came back very late for breakfast.

Christina had expected him half an hour earlier, and been rather disturbed about the spoiling of a kidney, a dish about which he was very particular.

When he came in she was busily putting fresh tea in the teapot.

"Well, friend, you're late this morning," she said, without looking up.

There was this good thing about Christina, she was never sullen.

Having said what she intended the evening before, she had no intention of recurring to it. She had a fiery temper of her own, but it was seldom, very seldom aroused, and to arouse it was not in George's power.

"I haven't been wasting my time, however," said he, speaking in an odd, half-shy, half-triumphant voice.

"You must sit down and eat this kidney *immediately*," said Christina; "don't even wait for your tea."

As she came round the table to take off the cover for him, she looked up and started violently.

"George!" she cried.

"Well," said George, with a half-sheepish, half-pleased smile, "what do you think of me?"

"Great Scott! how funny you look!" exclaimed Christina, bursting into the merriest laughter.

Very odd, indeed, he did look to her unaccustomed eyes as he stood before her shorn of his beloved beard, and intensely conscious of the deprivation.

It was not an improvement—it was decidedly not an improvement. It gave him the air of a quaint, grown-up boy, and exposed to view a loose-lipped, coarse mouth.

"Why, George, you will have to go about with a ticket on your back to say who you are!" said Christina, still affected with laughter. "I don't believe I should have known you if I had met you in Strada Reale."

His face fell terribly.

"Do you think—do you not think—it is an improvement, then?" he said, anxiously.

Christina evaded the question.

"What on earth put such an extraordinary freak into your head?" she said.

"It wasn't," said George, rather sulkily.

"Wasn't what?" said Christina; "wasn't a freak?"

"It doesn't matter now, anyhow," said he, turning his shoulder to her and helping himself to salt and butter.

But the blank relapse into disappointment was more than she could stand.

"Perhaps I shall like it when I get used to it, dear," she said, gently, "or you can let it grow again——"

George pushed his plate from him passionately.

"There's no pleasing you!" he said. "Didn't you beg me to shave my beard when you first came out? And then when you said—when you talked about—it's being *bearable*, I thought perhaps it would please you—perhaps you

might see that though a fellow might be a bit rough—and now you do nothing but laugh at me. *Damn it!*"

He dashed out of the room and the flat before Christina had time to think of stopping him, or had even collected her scattered wits.

She was completely amazed.

What had come to George?

Had she been unkind, more unkind than she knew? Poor fellow! he had come in so full of hope and a wish to please her, and she had not understood.

Great tears of pity rose slowly into her eyes.

She was very sorry—she would be kind, very kind when he came back.

But surely there was something a little bit childish about his angry departure. He had spilt his tea and overturned his chair, and run out like a naughty boy.

Unwillingly, with tears in her eyes, Christina began to laugh.

CHAPTER XIII.

"HAVE you got any nice white petticoats—the kind with holes in them stitched round, you know," said Campbell, insinuatingly.

"My *dear* Mr. Campbell!" said Christina.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Stoddart; I didn't see you," said Campbell, turning round and raising his cap.

Christina and Gerty Ruskin-Boyd were out shopping, and had discovered Campbell on coming into Hoskins' in search of a sunshade.

"What extraordinary purchases you seem to be making!" said Gerty.

"It's all right, really, you know," said Campbell; "but I have been obliged to explain fully in every shop because it did sound so exceedingly awkward. Will you come and support me through the ordeal of asking for ladies' gloves and—stockings?"

"Oh, it's for the play, of course!" exclaimed Gerty.

"Do you mean to say *you're* in the secret, too!" said Campbell; and then to cover this speech, which dawned upon him after he had made it as doubtfully polite, he added hastily, "By the way, I wonder you recognised me."

"Recognised you?" said Christina, in surprise.

"Is it possible? Aren't you more familiar with my appearance than that?" said Campbell, tragically. "Don't you see I have sacrificed my moustache in the interests of art?"

"Of course," said Christina, "I couldn't imagine what had so changed you. Don't be tactless, Gerty, even if it doesn't make quite as much difference as the loss of George's beard. Here are the sunshades."

"But do come and help me over the petticoats," said Campbell. "I am sure my need is the most imminent. Which is the latest thing, Mrs. Stoddart—lace or flounces or holes sewn round?"

When they had chosen, and also selected for him a pair of black silk stockings, resisting a sudden ambition on his part to have them open-work, an idea struck Campbell.

"I am to have an undress rehearsal in my rooms this afternoon," he said. "I am detached to the Marsamuscetto steps, as there isn't room at the Auberge de Baviar, and I have capital rooms. I wish you would come, Mrs. Stoddart."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Christina.

"Yes, you can, if you will," said Campbell; "even if we were to be 'tetty-tet,' nobody minds me, and, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Bell is to be there. It will be immensely proper. Do come."

"And I may come, too, mayn't I?" said Gerty. "Oh, do say I may! I shan't be allowed to go and see the play because it is in Lent, but a rehearsal is *quite* different."

"Of course you must come," said Campbell. "There will be tea for Mrs. Stoddart and for me, and whisky and soda for you, Miss Ruskin-Boyd, or champagne if you prefer it."

"Your stage manager wouldn't relish such an intrusion," said Christina, doubtfully.

"I'm not afraid of Andrew," said Gerty, with much decision.

In her heart Christina was burning to see her play and McLeod's. It was quite possible that she, like Gerty, though from a different reason, would not see it acted. She wanted to see McLeod again very much also; she felt that his confidence in her had established a special bond between them. And she had a very youthful desire for the *fun of it*. George and her position had temporarily worried away much of her very great capacity for enjoyment; still she had had no one heavy trouble to crush out the mere pleasure of being alive, and on the smallest opportunity was quite able to enjoy herself, almost, as Gerty would have put it, "to ecstasy."

If it had not been for Gerty she would have hesitated less; Lady Ruskin-Boyd would certainly neither approve of the subject of the play nor of her daughter going to see it in Lent.

But when Gerty announced with emphatic decision that, whether Chrissy went or not, she would go, Christina gave way.

Campbell arranged to meet them in the library, and came there for them later. He was catholic in his tastes and admired both of them, and was delighted to carry them off to his rooms. He was very comfortably lodged high up at Marsamuscetto, where he could overlook the quarantine harbour, and had a good chance of coolness on the hottest day that might come.

McLeod was there, and a couple of men who were to take small parts; also the Bells—he, a slight, consumptive-looking man of thirty, and she to all appearance a few years older, with a handsome, worn face.

Christina had not seen McLeod since that evening on the roof, and unconsciously expected some sign of special friendship from him; but, on the contrary, he looked by no means pleased to see her, and greeted her with his most chilling courtesy.

She heard him saying something to Campbell under his breath about "turning the whole thing into a farce," which under the circumstances she felt to be rather hard.

It was Gerty he drew aside.

"Gerty, you'd much better have some tea and go home,"

he said; "your mother would be awfully annoyed if she knew you were here."

"I daresay she would," said Gerty, calmly; "she thinks it dreadful of you to act in Lent. However, Andrew, unless you carry me I'm not going—and that would create a scandal."

"Very well. Please yourself."

McLeod was in a black temper. He scowled over the tendency of the whole party to turn the business into an informal tea party, and he had an uncomfortable inclination to look across at Mrs. Stoddart every few minutes to see if she was watching him, and if there was any remembrance of their last talk in her eyes.

Campbell was immensely hospitable, and had enough tea and cakes provided for three times the number of his guests, and he and Gerty were both wildly festive. Gerty was frankly fond of cake, and was on extremely hail-fellow-well-met terms with Campbell.

She was also exhilarated by a sensation of wrongdoing, quite as wicked as, and much more entertaining than, eating meat on Friday. She would have to confess it of course, but—*vogue la galère*—she would in the meantime have as much fun as she could.

"Jorrocks, I don't see much good in my staying," said McLeod, aside; "nobody will do anything but play the fool."

"Don't look as if you'd like to cut my throat, Tommy," said Campbell, laughing, but, to his own annoyance, McLeod felt himself change colour at the careless words. "It's all right; we'll call them to order. Mrs. Bell, shall we start?"

Mrs. Bell was quite ready. She stipulated that Campbell should make some attempt at petticoats, if she was to look upon him as her daughter, and this caused still further delay and a good deal more fooling on Campbell's part.

Christina wondered how McLeod had ever dreamed of depending on him, but when they began to act she ceased to wonder.

Campbell threw himself into his part, forgetting his absurdities and managing his voice and dress remarkably

well. McLeod had undergone so many transformations in Christina's opinion that he could not now surprise her very much. It absurdly seemed more unnatural to her than anything else he could do that, with such a terrible tragedy to face, he should look and behave so much like other men.

She had quite expected that he would be able to act. His stiffness and his absent manner had vanished at once, and she saw her hero almost as she had imagined him. Almost—not quite; Christina realized that a certain unwholesomeness about him had in some vague way disappeared. She realized it with a sudden admiration for the man who had unconsciously made the difference.

McLeod's part was not a large one, nor comparatively of importance.

The chief interest of the play centred in the mother and daughter.

Campbell had the part of the daughter, upon whom the discovery of her mother's hidden and unsuspected sin was unwillingly forced.

He was very good, but that afternoon Christina and McLeod both realized that only a woman could have acted the part absolutely as it should be acted.

Once, when he was not needed, McLeod came and stood beside her for a few minutes.

"Will it do?" he said.

"I never thought it would be so good," said Christina.

"Oh, I wish I could see it properly acted!" said Gerty; "it is ripping! I shall go mad if it is a failure!"

McLeod was resentfully conscious that the turn of her words made Christina look at him impulsively.

"I think Campbell will do," he said, rather stiffly.

But he was a little anxious about him, all the same. Even if he succeeded in conquering his sense of the comical, could he be certain of keeping him sober?

"Of course you will come, on the night?" he said to Christina.

"I don't know; I should like it."

She was indignant with McLeod for asking the question in such a tone of commonplace civility; he knew her difficulties better than any one else.

Would it be possible for her to go? There was not the

smallest chance of her being able to manage it without George—he loved going out. Was there any fear of his guessing? If only McLeod and she had bethought themselves of changing the names, but it was too late now. Would he remember?

She would have liked to consult McLeod, but he had turned away, and was to all appearance engrossed by the performers; and he had been so extremely distant and unfriendly all afternoon.

Presently, when everybody was leaving, he undertook to see Gerty home, and left Christina to Campbell's escort.

"Bones is in a divine temper to-day!" said Campbell to Christina. "I suppose he thought we were all too frivolous, and he has really taken any amount of trouble."

But Christina was bitterly disappointed. Nobody seemed to want her sympathy or friendship. She was sorry for McLeod with all her heart, and he had been annoyed and not pleased to see her, and had seemed more inclined to talk to Gerty than to her. It was he and not she who was unwilling to be friends now.

CHAPTER XIV.

McLeod awoke on the eventful day appointed for the performance of his play with a decided sense of satisfaction that it had come at last. So far, everything had gone very successfully.

He had spent a good deal of time and money in having everything of the best. He had sent to England for the most part of the scenery, and had spent the preceding day at the Florian concert room, with a couple of carpenters and half a dozen men, making preparations.

He had studied his own part till the man he was to represent absolutely lived to him, and had spent as much time as he could succeed in persuading from Campbell in coaching that young man.

He had taken a great deal of pleasure and interest out

of it all, but just now he had become rather overanxious for success.

Those terrible fits of depression were becoming harder and harder to fight off. He could struggle with them in the daytime, but at night, as hour after hour came without bringing sleep, the effort was a much greater one. He had tried to put down this sleeplessness entirely to the change from the still nights at Pembroke to the Valetta bells. He would get up and dress, and go out into the square and down to the sea, finding a strange satisfaction in playing with that haunting temptation of his, all alone, in the dead of the night.

It might be better when the anxiety of the play was over. He woke this morning from a few hours' restless sleep full of the hope that it would.

For the first time things went perversely. To begin with, McLeod's servant came to him before breakfast to tell him that there was a difficulty about the programmes, and some mistake as to the time they were ordered for. Then a couple of the men managed to smash a large flower-stand, especially lent as a particular favour by the colonel.

This was a bad beginning.

McLeod drove down to Florian about eleven with Seton-Kerr, who had a small part, and was generally useful. Shortly afterwards the catalogue of misfortunes was continued. One of the sergeants, who was extremely neat-handed and had been very useful, managed to fall from a ladder and get his arm broken, and in the excitement of this accident another man cannoned through some scenery with disastrous results.

At intervals during the morning the performers dropped in and gave some perfunctory assistance, with the exception of Campbell, who was at garrison class.

"I shouldn't wonder if Jorrocks didn't turn up this afternoon, either," said one man.

"Why?" said McLeod, with sharp dismay.

"Been keeping Christmas!" said Seton-Kerr, laughing.

McLeod gave an impatient exclamation. Campbell had been going on wonderfully steadily lately. There had been a regimental guest night the evening before, and McLeod,

who had invited no guest and felt seedy, had left fairly early. Evidently Campbell had not.

"He made a general idiot of himself," said Seton-Kerr, with some amusement. "He started to wrestle with McFerran, of all people in the world, and nearly got his back broken; then he insisted on laying odds with Grant that he could turn a somersault backward over a couple of chairs, and came to almighty smash; then he and a few others went off and played the goat all over the shop."

"He had better drop fooling for this evening," said McLeod.

Everything must and should go right. From the first, Campbell had occasioned his greatest misgiving. However, he would look after him at dinnertime.

He went to see that the chairs were properly arranged.

After some indecision, it had been decided in favour of invitations as opposed to purchased tickets.

The play would only last a little over an hour, and about the manner in which the rest of the evening was to be spent, dispute had waxed hot.

McLeod wanted to have an interval filled up by the band, to be followed by an informal musical performance, with groups of chairs round little tables for the spectators, and refreshments going on, with supper to follow.

Campbell and Seton-Kerr said they had discovered the third wooden floor in Malta, and wanted to have a dance, but were dissuaded on its being put before them that the floor would scarcely be in good condition after rows of chairs had been ranged upon it the hour before.

So McLeod had his way.

In the afternoon Campbell came down, looking rather dilapidated, with the Bells, and later on Christina arrived, according to a promise, convoying two *carrozzes* full of flowerpots, and assisted by Grant and Gerty.

There was no atmosphere of tragedy about McLeod this afternoon when they came upon him in his shirt sleeves, with his red hair on end and a streak of green paint down his nose.

"Would you mind going to the farthest end of the room and finding if you can hear me quite distinctly," he

said to Christina. He was not thinking about anything but the play, obviously.

Campbell rebelled, and declared it made him nervous to stand up there and try his voice in the empty room. He followed Christina, and asked her if it was decided that she was coming that evening.

Christina nodded. The invitation had been too tempting to refuse, and she had made up her mind to run the risk of George's guessing.

Gerty, at the other end of the room, had been making herself very agreeable to McLeod's dogs, from an interested hope of gratifying their master, and being allowed to remain for the final rehearsal.

Presently she got up and went over to Grant, with Jinks in her arms, very much pleased by her attention, and trying to reach her face with his little red tongue. This was Jinks's one, unappreciated way of showing his gratitude.

Grant was standing with his hands in his pockets and a charming smile on his handsome face, watching Mr. Bell and a sergeant struggling to lift a heavy flowerpot into place.

"It's all right," Gerty said, under her breath. "Mrs. Maude is going to bring me, and she hasn't the remotest idea that mamma doesn't know."

"Ah, really?" said Grant.

"Aren't you glad? Don't you care?" said Gerty, with a sudden sharpness of misgiving in her voice.

"Of course I care," said Grant, softly; "but I am not sure that you would not be wiser to give it up. I won't be so selfish as to urge you."

"And if I don't go, what will you do?" said Gerty.

"Oh, I suppose I shall have to look in. It's a regimental show, you see. But it would be selfish of me to ask you to come, just for my own pleasure."

It was a remarkable fact that only during the last week had his selfishness begun to trouble Grant.

Gerty looked at him with doubtful, wistful eyes.

"Do you *want* me to come?" she said again.

"Of course I do," he said, rather absently. "Will you excuse me for a moment? I want to speak to Mrs. Bell about a song I promised her last night."

"Ananias has begun his old game," said Campbell to

Christina, at their post at the back of the hall. "Capital, old chap! I can hear every word," he added, approvingly, to McLeod.

McLeod came up to Christina as she was going away, and talked to her for a few minutes in his most friendly manner.

Then she and Gerty went off, unaccompanied by Grant.

Gerty explained, anxiously, that he had said that he would not come "because it would be so selfish to make her too conspicuous."

"When a man begins to talk of his being *selfish*," said Christina, "you may be quite sure he's getting fickle."

She still had a certain personal feeling with regard to Captain Grant—a certain wounded vanity which drove her to cynical words.

Grant did not get much chance of talking to Mrs. Bell just then, as McLeod ordered him out of the room before the final rehearsal.

The performers acquitted themselves very satisfactorily —even Campbell, who had a splitting headache, and was in an irritable frame of mind.

"I want you to dine at the club with me, Jorrocks, and come down here early," said McLeod.

"I can't," said Campbell; "I am engaged to dine with some naval chaps, but I shall be here in lots of time."

"Can't you work it?" said McLeod; and on most days Campbell, who was the soul of good nature, would at least have made the attempt.

This afternoon he was perfectly certain he couldn't.

"For Heaven's sake then," said McLeod, rather roughly, "mind what you're about. Don't go playing the goat."

"Oh, all right," said Campbell; "trust me to look after myself, old chap."

But McLeod scarcely felt so gloriously confident.

Generally, difficulties rather exhilarated him, but just at present he did not feel so thoroughly equal to coping with them as usual.

Still, every one by a sort of instinct appealed to him whenever anything went wrong, and he always rose to the occasion.

The play must and should be a success.

McLeod only went up to the club in time for a hasty dinner, and was back again at Florian by eight o'clock, an hour before any of his guests were due.

The room was arranged with groups of chairs and small round tables, and had a pleasingly informal appearance about it, "and lots of room for the legs," as Grant had remarked approvingly, with a reminiscence of many smoking concerts.

McLeod had a good many last directions to give and last touches to put, but everything was as finally ready as he could make it by the time the first arrivals made their appearance.

There was a considerable preponderance of men among the guests.

The Camerons had had mess an hour earlier than usual and were there in a body, and large contingents from the other regiments were already beginning to arrive.

Then the Bells had asked some friends, and so had Campbell, and there was a sprinkling of sailors—very much in the minority.

The Stoddarts were in good time, and some of the Camerons, who felt themselves to a certain extent in the position of hosts, found them a table. Christina was decidedly popular among men, perhaps by reason of her complete indifference to them. She was always willing to talk, and instinctively anxious to make herself liked; but that was all, unless some individuality about a man struck her with a view to her writing.

Indifference had become a habit with her during the years when her marriage was not known, just as with some girls it becomes a habit to brighten up upon the appearance of a man of any kind.

George liked to see her talk to half a dozen men at once; it was only when there was one alone that he felt called upon to interfere. He leaned back in his chair, with his usual air of supreme complacence, a trifle marred by an acute consciousness of his beardless condition.

"Time's up," said McFerran, looking at his watch. "I wonder will they be punctual."

"Why, Kitty, you look quite excited," said George, laughing.

Christina started. If she allowed herself to look as she felt, would not everybody, having already proved so observant and not knowing the truth, quite naturally put down her anxiety entirely to interest in McLeod?

"I believe McLeod is absolutely nervous for once in his life," said another youth in trews. "By Jove! the band is starting something fresh—what's that for?"

"Why, Gerty!" said Christina.

Miss Ruskin-Boyd came across to the group with a certain nervous gaiety.

"Well?" she said, flippantly; "I suppose you thought me at home and in bed? But I didn't see the fun of that. I got mamma to let me go and dine with Mrs. Maude, and didn't mention the after-dinner entertainment."

She spoke quickly, in a rather forced tone, and glanced toward the door at hasty intervals. There was an instinct of trouble in Gerty's mind already.

McFerran, who was sitting next his wife, and, like the others, looked upon Gerty as rather a joke, rose to offer her his seat, and asked her what she thought her cousin would say to her.

"Andrew!" said Gerty, in her clear, high-pitched voice; "there'll be the devil to pay if Andrew finds out. Andrew is too gloriously virtuous for me—one of those young men who never gave their mothers a moment's anxiety."

"I can't allow you to malign him like that," said McFerran, laughing; "you must remember he's in my regiment."

Gerty began an answer, and then suddenly lost the thread of what she was saying, and Christina, who was sitting with her back to the door, guessed from the radiance in her face that Grant had come in.

At the same moment the band, after a short consultation among themselves, started a third item, a valse this time, and there was a general movement of impatience among the audience.

George said he wondered how much later the performance would be.

McFerran said he hoped there wasn't a hitch somewhere.

Gordon came out of the stage door, with rather a perturbed face, and made his way hastily through the audience, with every appearance of being full of business.

Evidently something was wrong.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT had happened was this: McLeod had been breathlessly busy during the last half hour before the play ought to have begun. He had been anxious about Campbell, but was relieved when a sergeant, who was helping with the curtain, told him that Mr. Campbell had come.

McLeod was in a shooting coat, in which he was to make his first appearance on the stage. He had only to put on a dark wig and moustache and to blacken his eyebrows.

As he was giving the bandmaster a few parting injunctions, the sergeant came up to him and drew him mysteriously aside.

"Sir," he said, "Mr. Seton-Kerr sent me to the gentlemen's dressing room just now, and there's a lady in it!"

"A lady?" said McLeod; then he remembered and laughed. "Didn't you turn her out?" he said.

"Well, sir, it was for that I wanted to speak to you," said the man, with some hesitation. "The lady is—very drunk, sir."

McLeod started as if he had been shot, and swore audibly.

"I thought I had better come and ask you what you would wish me to do, sir."

"You were quite right; I'll see to it," said McLeod, hastily.

With more than a misgiving on his mind, he went to the dressing room and found his worst fears realized.

Campbell had not been too drunk to get himself into his clothes after a fashion; he had even made a weak attempt at rouging, and had put on his wig quite crookedly.

He looked rather a pretty young woman, and decidedly a dissipated one, as he lounged on the table in the middle of a medley of feminine and masculine garments. He had his back against the wall and his feet on a chair, and had evidently had an idea of making himself as comfortable as possible with the limited means available.

McLeod stood and looked at him in dead silence for several minutes; then he turned away and called Mr. Bell. But Mr. Bell was dismayed and absolutely devoid of suggestions.

There was a disreputable suggestion of impropriety about Campbell's costume, combined with his attitude and condition.

"I am sure I don't know what to do," said Mr. Bell, helplessly.

"It's all my fault," said McLeod. "I was an ass to have any faith in a chap like Campbell."

Campbell roused up to his name, and said indistinctly that he was all right—quite ready to go on.

"Do you think he could manage it?" said Mr. Bell, dubiously.

"It would be an insult to Mrs. Bell to ask her to go on with him in this state," said McLeod, in a concentrated voice.

Seton-Kerr and another man came to look in. The group grew; the prompter, a couple of sergeants, and a carpenter formed a fitting background.

Campbell was rather pleased than otherwise, and smiled benignly upon them all, later going into unexplained fits of laughter.

Everybody had some more or less futile suggestion to make. One man said that the best thing to be done was to take Campbell into the air; another, that fresh air was of all things to be avoided; somebody proposed to give him a cold-water douche; somebody else to let him sleep himself sober.

It was only to McLeod that it occurred to send a message to the band to play something else.

Campbell, meanwhile, was by no means quiescent; occasionally he vowed he was going on, he didn't care who said no; and occasionally, with half-maudlin penitence, he

assured McLeod that he was very sorry, and would do his best.

"What about having the pipers' reel now, or Lady Eva Wrench's skirt dance? We could spend the time trying to wake up Campbell," suggested Seton-Kerr.

"We must, I suppose," said McLeod, grimly. "I suppose everybody will make up their minds the whole thing is meant to be comic. I would rather drop the play than have it turned into a farce. What do you fellows say?"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Bell, with an effort at cheerfulness. "I'll go and speak to my wife. She must be wondering what has happened."

"I am quite ready to do as the rest of you decide," said McLeod. "I must apologize, Bell, to you and especially to your wife. Seton-Kerr, will you go——" He stopped, realizing that Seton-Kerr could not make his appearance among the audience in the attire of a smart groom. "Gordon," he said, "for the Lord's sake, go and see to the pipers. Arrange for Grant to take his banjo solo after them, and then the Campanology. By that time we will know what we can do with Campbell."

McLeod had not lost his head. He had only lost all his inward enthusiasm and pleasure in the play, and everything concerning it.

He felt one of the blackest of his fits of depression was awaiting him, to be met and fought with as best he might when he should have time to think. The play and his part of it had become something to be got through with an effort.

It was a failure.

The pipers danced their reel, Captain Grant played the banjo, and the Campanology went off successfully, after which the play began, just as everybody was beginning to think it had been forgotten.

People were a trifle puzzled. They were politely anxious to do their duty, but extremely doubtful whether the performance was supposed to be comic or tragic.

At the end of the first scene Campbell had to appear, and made his entrance, as a daughter returning to her parents after years of absence, consumed with immoderate laughter.

The parents' greeting was decidedly nervous and covered burning indignation.

Christina had been watching George until now, fearful lest any reminiscence should be aroused in his mind, but now she transferred her attention to the performers. She was the first to discover that something was very wrong indeed.

It was flat—dreadfully flat. Nobody knew whether to laugh or to look solemn.

Campbell's identity had not been disclosed to the regiment, but, as he shortly forgot to avoid his ordinary voice, it was promptly discovered, and provoked a good deal of half-suppressed merriment.

The Camerons were loyal, and the rest of the assemblage was polite, but no one knew exactly what it was all about.

Then came a scene in which Campbell was entirely absent, and Mrs. Bell and McLeod rose to the occasion and interested their audience.

But afterwards Campbell appeared again, in a state of decided confusion. He forgot his part, and stopped to inquire loudly from the prompter: "*What* do you say? By Jove! I can't hear a syllable!" He walked the stage with a manly if somewhat uncertain tread, proved peculiarly affectionate as a daughter, and finally went to sleep when he was supposed to be writing a note and waiting for his cue.

"It is rather a stupid play, I am afraid," said Mrs. McFerran, with a puzzled look. "I suppose that girl is meant to be comic, Harry?" she added to her husband. But neither he nor any of the rest of the audience knew. A faint suspicion of the truth was beginning to dawn on the perplexity of a few.

The curtain had been rung down, and the performers stood in a disgusted group on the stage.

"We can't go on," said McLeod; "it's no use. The next scene is entirely Campbell's."

"Certainly we can't go on," said Mrs. Bell, tartly. She was very naturally annoyed with the whole matter, and inclined to throw all the blame on McLeod.

"I suppose I must go and say *something* by way of apology?" said McLeod, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, I don't think you need. I am sure they haven't the faintest idea whether we are at the beginning or middle or end," said Mrs. Bell, in wrathful tones. "I am sure nothing could make them more puzzled than they are already."

"What's wrong?" said Campbell, serenely.

Mrs. Bell turned her back upon him, and walked off to the dressing room with much decision. Her husband followed her; he, too, was rather irritated, and too much annoyed with McLeod for the moment to proffer him any help. It was natural, if unreasonable.

"Shall I go on in front and say something, Bones?" said Seton-Kerr, good-naturedly.

"No, I shan't shirk it," said McLeod. "Will you, like a good chap, see after Campbell, and I'll go on and apologize, and then try and fix the rest of the performance."

McLeod said he was very sorry that the short play they had proposed to give could not proceed. He gave no reason, and said the second part of the programme would now begin after a short interval.

But there was a want of go about the whole affair. People sat about in groups, and ate ices and drank according to their tastes; they listened to the different performers with varied satisfaction, and were always ready to express polite approval, but a chill seemed to have got into the whole evening.

Even at the informal supper, when everything was over, it was with an effort that anything like informality was kept up.

Captain Grant and his brother saved the evening from being a complete failure. They insisted on pushing aside the chairs and setting a dance on foot.

All this time McLeod had been doing his best as host, going from one guest to another, with much courtesy and more readiness to talk than usual.

Now, as the room was being prepared for dancing and the band were getting their instruments ready, while a man had been despatched post-haste to the Auberge de Baviar for music, he came across the room to Mrs. Stoddart.

"I am very sorry about this," he said, in a low voice. "I can't tell you how much I blame myself."

"How could it possibly be your fault?" said Christina, impulsively; "it is worse for you than for any one."

McLeod smiled slightly.

"It is rather a smash," he said.

"It doesn't matter so much as you *feel*," said Christina, in a low voice; "don't you know, Captain McLeod, how things get quite out of proportion sometimes?"

"I didn't know I took a beating so badly," said McLeod.

The band had struck up a valse, and Mr. Grant of the Dauntless came up and asked Christina to dance.

She looked at McLeod, hesitated for a moment, and said she was sorry, but she was engaged.

Then, when Mr. Grant had secured a dance later on and gone away, she turned to McLeod doubtfully.

"Perhaps you would rather I hadn't done that," she said; "but I felt I would rather be disappointed with you than dance over the grave of our poor play. I shall never be able to speak civilly to Mr. Campbell again."

"Don't let us talk about Campbell, please," said McLeod, hastily; "I should say too much."

"After all the trouble you have had! Can't you have the thing some other time?"

McLeod shook his head.

"The Bells leave in a few days; they stayed on especially for this—fiasco. And I certainly couldn't ask Mrs. Bell to act with Campbell again."

"Believe me, you're too tragic about it," said Christina. "Let's go and argue it out somewhere," she added, hastily, seeing George and his partner bearing down upon them.

McLeod took her to find seats in a corner where some of the chairs had been piled.

Probably she was right, he reflected, and his feeling about it all was overdone and morbid, and the result of nights without sleep.

But overdone or not, the effect was the same.

He hated failure, and he had failed.

He had looked for the success or failure of this night as a sort of superstitious omen.

Then he remembered that to Christina it must be a disappointment, too. How much more kindly she took it than the others had done.

But why was she so much kinder?

McLeod looked at her with a sharp suspicion, which he put into words a moment later.

"Would you talk as you do and be as friendly as you are if things were different with me?"

"I hope you don't wish to imply that you think me forward?" said Christina, with forced lightness.

"You know what I mean," said McLeod, in a low voice; "are you kind to me—as a dying man?"

He looked at her with grave, earnest brown eyes, and she felt compelled to answer him simply and truthfully.

"It is very hard to work out one's own motives," she said, slowly. "I daresay what you have said to me does influence me. But I know the top motive is the selfish one of liking to talk to you, whatever the others may be. There, that's honestly the truth."

"You can turn me into a story," said McLeod, with a faint smile, "and you won't have long to wait for the last chapter."

Christina turned to face him suddenly.

"Captain McLeod," she said, "you are not going to give in? I did think you had pluck to fight to the last."

CHAPTER XVI.

Campbell came slowly into McLeod's room as the latter was fastening his riding gaiters.

His usual cheerful, noisy manner was quite gone. He looked white and downcast, and unspeakably ashamed of himself.

He had undergone a very formal subalterns' court-martial in the dead hours of the night before, and had been condemned to apologize to everybody under pain of severe measures on the part of the court.

McLeod looked up and then returned to his gaiter.

"Won't you sit down, Campbell," he said, politely; and nothing could have more distinctly marked his displeas-

ure than such unusual politeness. "Do you want anything?"

"McLeod," said Campbell, and then he came to a dead stop for a few minutes.

"Look here," he began again, nervously. "I can't say more than that I am sorry—that I would give a hundred pounds not to have made such a hog of myself."

"You can't say more—of course not," said McLeod. "Would you mind looking if my crop is behind you?"

"Oh, if you are going to take it like that," said Campbell, dismally.

He stood looking on idly while McLeod made his preparations.

"Of course, I know you've a lot to complain of," he began again; "but, upon my soul, I don't know how it happened. It's not so pleasant for me, either. I have to go and apologize to Mrs. Bell, and I swear I'd rather lose a year of my life. The Lord knows how I am to look anybody in Malta in the face again, after making such a hideous ass of myself."

McLeod said nothing.

"I am sure I had better stick to barracks for the rest of the winter," said Campbell, disconsolately.

"I feel for you," said McLeod. "I shouldn't be surprised if it took you a full week to recover."

Campbell stood looking at him in dismal silence, while he took up his cap and whip and prepared to go out. He had had an immense worship and admiration for McLeod ever since he had joined, and his hero was to all appearance implacable.

"Well, if you are going to drop me, I can't help it," he said—"nor wonder very much either, I suppose."

"Rot! I am not going to drop you, as you call it. I suppose you don't expect me to be particularly grateful to you for having made a fool of me before half Malta," said McLeod, coldly.

"You won't drop me, but I may go to the devil my own way. Very well. I hope you will have a pleasant ride."

McLeod walked down to the stables, with the dismal fiasco of the night before still too indignantly fresh in his mind for an unnecessary word to be said to Campbell.

He rode down to Strada Mezzodi, to call for Mrs. Stoddart, with a gloomy face, and they started upon their ride very silently.

Christina had a good many things to think of, too. She had avoided a disagreeable interview with George by saying nothing to him about her arrangement with McLeod for that afternoon; but by doing so she had only postponed the evil hour.

Was she very wrong in giving George such clear and just ground for complaint? If McLeod had been as other men, there could have been no doubt as to the answer.

They rode round to Sliema almost in silence, and then McLeod made a suggestion.

"Shall we get boys to hold the ponies," he said, "and go right on, down over the rocks to the end of the harbour? There will be splendid waves there this afternoon."

"I should like it very much," said Christina, as she would have said to almost any proposition of his just then.

They dismounted, and went on along a narrow path, past the fort, where groups of soldiers were spending a lazy afternoon, on over the rocks, till they came almost within reach of the dashing waves.

The open sea was before them, and great green waves came swelling in, bursting into whiteness against the rocks, and sending flying drops of salt water into quite distant little pools and crannies.

One or two green fishing boats were tossing about among the white-tipped waves. Their brown sails now rose high in air, now dipped down till almost out of sight.

"It is glorious!" said Christina, pausing, while the salt wind tossed her hair and a dash of spray came wet and cold against her cheek; "but don't let us go any nearer. The rocks are quite wet, and my riding boots slip so."

McLeod stopped, standing tall and powerful in front of her, with a background of sea and sky. He took off his cap and held it in his hand, letting the breeze blow on his uncovered head.

Christina had never noticed before what strong, capable hands his were, and what strength there was about his whole appearance and bearing.

She could scarcely keep a cowardly suggestion of overhaste out of her voice as she proposed that they should sit down.

McLeod found her a fairly comfortable rock for a seat; he stood beside her, looking out over the sea. He broke silence first.

"Do you remember what you said to me last night about having pluck to fight on to the last? I am very glad you said it."

His eyes were on the sea, and he spoke half to himself.

"Do you know what it is," he said, "to have a strong temptations tugging at you, and to have to fight against it all you know—not just now and then, but always, always, night and day? And worse at night. I can hear the waves in my room at barracks when it is quiet in the night. I should be afraid to come here this afternoon if it wasn't for you."

Christina sat very still and upright.

"I am not a bit afraid," she said, in a steady voice. "I know you are not a coward."

"I shall fight on till the last," said McLeod, with his grave brown eyes full on her face; "but, Mrs. Stoddart, when a day comes that there is certainty, when there is no more fighting and no more hope, will you call me a coward if I take the only way out of it?"

"You are asking me a dreadful question."

"But if I have pluck, so have you. You will answer me, won't you? I can't face such a death in life as my brother's. Could *you?* Will you blame me?"

"Don't talk as if there was no hope," said Christina; "and if there was, though it might be the easiest way for *you*——"

"Thank God, there is no one else to think of."

McLeod stood looking at her expectantly. He had begun to view his own judgment with doubt and hesitation. Christina knew very well that if she answered him with a platitude, any influence she might have with him would be gone at once; he wanted the truth.

She grew white.

"I—could not blame you," she said.

What had she done? Would she have cause to be sorry for her words all the rest of her life?

"Thank you," said McLeod, simply.

He had been standing, still and expectant, but now he came to establish himself on a rock beside her, half sitting, half leaning on one elbow.

A vulgar panic at the thought of what George and Valetta would say could they have seen them filled Christina's mind for a minute.

McLeod began to light a cigarette.

"Do you think it is worse or better to die when there is nobody to care?" he said, calmly. "There was Beresford last year—that girl who was to have married him just thought the sun rose and set on him. He had to fight for his life for her sake to the very last."

"I don't think you ought to brood over that," said Christina; "it isn't right."

Somehow she and McLeod seemed to have quite changed places this afternoon.

"It's never quite out of my mind," he said. "I don't see how it could be. It works round often into convincing me that it is just for me to take my life to pay for his. And then I know my reasoning is crooked somewhere, and wonder if I am sane or mad."

"What would he say to that sort of reasoning himself?" said Christina. She found it hard indeed to choose what words were best and safest.

McLeod suddenly smiled broadly.

"He'd say, 'Hang it all, old chap! who's been letting out your sawdust?' He always said that when he saw a fellow down on his luck, though I can't for the life of me remember what started the expression."

Then the amusement died out of his eyes.

"It's like this," he said; "I must face death or worse very soon. I can't go on living like this. It is neither right nor safe."

"Once when you were lecturing me on the evil of my ways," said Christina, "you said, 'Go straight on as far as you can see; no one can do more.'"

"Yes," said McLeod; "but when a fellow can't see any way at all, what then?"

"I wish—I wish I could help you!" said Christina.

The colour suddenly flushed into McLeod's fair face at the earnestness of her voice.

"Help me? I should think you *have* helped me—just by letting me speak out," he said. "What a selfish brute I am! Let's go home, or shall we go to the Ruskins to tea on our way? I won't ask you to ride with me again."

"If you don't, I shall ask you," said Christina.

"Do you know," said McLeod, as he helped her over the rocks, "I was awfully sorry I had told you at first, but by Jove! I'm not now!"

He talked cheerfully and pleasantly all the way home. It was Christina who was inclined to be a little absent.

What would come of it all?

Was it possible or right for her to repulse McLeod's friendship, now that she was clearly of use to him and might even be a safeguard?

But still George seemed to make such a friendship impossible—George and the Malta gossips. As a married woman, she had no right to disregard what people might say of her and her husband. But, in common humanity, could she throw away a chance of being a comfort to McLeod, when there was no evil about it, only the possibility of "an appearance of evil." She honestly tried to put her own feeling out of the question: the pleasure of talking freely and intimately with a *gentleman*, and a certain sense of flattered vanity in being chosen for McLeod's confidence.

If she had been a girl and free, how gladly, she told herself, would she have disregarded gossip on the chance of being of use to him.

And, most puzzling of all, was it right for her to keep his secret? She might find reason to regret having done so terribly.

But could she betray his confidence? He trusted her so completely that he had not even asked her for a promise.

And who could she tell? If she told George, she knew she might as well publish it in the streets of Valetta. There was a weight of the responsibility she dreaded whichever way she turned.

Her own affairs were in themselves quite sufficiently puzzling.

Was it possible for her to remain with George, now that his indifference, which had made life endurable, was become a thing of the past?

At the end of April or beginning of May the Dauntless was to pay off, in all probability going home first. Then it was possible George might again be sent to a distant station —Australia, Mauritius, somewhere too far away and too expensive for her to go out.

But it was equally possible, perhaps more so, that he might not.

Other men's wives had, she knew, helped to work such things, but that she would not do. She must leave it to chance.

If George's lines were cast in England, what then? Should she then finally make up her mind to give up the rest of her life to him or to leave him?

These questions must all be settled some day. In the meantime, awaiting a decisive inspiration, Christina pursued her favourite policy of masterly inactivity.

CHAPTER XVII.

"THERE!" said Miss White—"there's McLeod gone up to the Stoddarts' box again. It's positively disgraceful!"

The acerbity in her tone was emphasized by the non-arrival of the generally faithful Mr. Taylor.

She had remarked to her mother on an average twice every five minutes since their arrival at the opera, that she would give it to him well when he came, and that it made you feel such a fool not to have a man in the box. She had even made an affectation of sitting with her back to the stage, so that the Bernards, almost opposite, should imagine she was talking to somebody in the recesses of the box.

The opera was Cavalleria Rusticana; both Mrs. and Miss White had seen it several times before, but they had not and did not want to have the smallest idea what it was all

about. Miss White found the stalls much more attractive than the stage.

Soldiers were just beginning to come in in twos and threes after mess, and there was already a large contingent of naval officers, far outnumbering the Maltese, who were few on a "White night."

The Camerons were there in force, two lengthening rows of them—some listening, one or two talking, and a couple asleep in ungraceful attitudes. Grant and some others had already begun a round of box-visiting.

"Mother," said Miss White, "isn't George Stoddart a fool not to put a stop to that sort of business? For all so high and mighty as she is, Mrs. Stoddart is making a dead set at McLeod. I expect she would take a chance of being Lady Drumesk at any price, if he is such a fool as to give it to her. Upon my word, there are two more men going into her box. What on earth can they see in her? I am sure she's not pretty."

"I see Captain Wishaw in the stalls. I expect he will come up and see us," said Mrs. White, by way of soothing her daughter's irritable mood.

"Captain Wishaw! Horrid, fat old man!" said Miss White, contemptuously.

Then the entrance of Mr. Taylor and a couple of friends proved mollifying.

Miss White preserved a dignified coldness for some time, but gradually allowed herself to be appeased.

"I am awfully sorry," said Mr. Taylor, "but I couldn't manage to get here sooner."

"I am sure I don't care if you had never come," said Miss White, in graceful badinage; "and now the best thing you can do is to go over to the Bernards' box. Miss Bernard is looking across at you, and I don't like to see a girl never able to get a man to speak to. Do go; it would be a charity, and I assure you I can get on without you. Somehow, I have always plenty of men friends."

"I am not going for a hundred Miss Bernards," said Mr. Taylor.

In his heart he had a sneaking admiration for pretty, gentle Miss Bernard; but he knew his duty better than to venture to speak to her while in attendance on Miss White.

"I am sure I don't want you!" said Miss White, tapping his arm with her fan. "If you won't go there, I wish you would go to the Stoddarts' box, and help the husband to play propriety. The great unknown is turning into an ordinary fellow very quick."

"What? That Cameron chap? Report says it is only a question of weeks there," said Mr. Taylor. He was popularly distinguished as having the worst tongue in Malta.

It is a well-known fact that all Malta scandals can be traced to the club, and if further followed up, they were generally found to have Mr. Taylor as a starting point.

Miss White roused herself at once into excitement.

"Oh, I *hope*," she said, "it isn't as bad as that. But I must say I *did* see them come in very late from a ride yesterday, and though I couldn't absolutely *see* from the balcony, if his arm wasn't round her waist, it was the next thing to it."

"As you couldn't see, Beatrice, and indeed in any case, wouldn't it have been more good-natured to keep that to yourself?" said Mrs. White.

"But really, Mrs. White, everybody says the same," said Mr. Taylor; "and you can't help seeing Stoddart is furiously jealous—just have a look at his face through my opera glass now."

"And Nora Giveen's mother said, I know for a fact, that she thought her far too giddy to chaperon Nora to the last club ball, as she offered to do."

"You see, McLeod never would speak to a woman, and now he's at her beck and call," Mr. Taylor explained. "She had a bouquet of flowers for the last club ball, which of course was given by him, and yesterday, when I was at Casal Lia for tea, I saw those two, to all appearance quite alone."

Unintentionally, in his over-enthusiastic zeal for truth, Mr. Taylor was the means of preserving a few remaining shreds of poor Christina's character.

"I should like to know what you were doing at Casal Lia yesterday afternoon, Mr. Taylor, when you told me you couldn't come to drive with me because you were busy at barracks," said Miss White, turning on him sharply.

"Now you are going to catch it, Taylor!" said one of

the other two men, and everybody laughed except Mr. Taylor, who got rather red and embarrassed among his excuses. He was very submissive and obedient, and was popularly supposed to be engaged to Miss White, but he occasionally lied for temporary freedom.

They made it up again shortly, and found exhilarating amusement in dropping bits of paper upon the bald head of a favoured sailor beneath.

Gossip was rampant, now that the season was drawing to a close. Everybody knew everything about everybody else in Valetta; it was an open secret how often each couple had danced together, and which flirtations might be confidently expected to end in something more serious, as distinguished from those in which one or both of the people interested only wanted a winter's amusement. It was equally an open secret that Mrs. Tomlins had quarrelled with her cook, because she (Mrs. Tomlins) would insist on going to market; that a very high and important dignitary had sent his daughter home, in consequence of her persistence in considering herself engaged to a penniless naval lieutenant; that Mrs. Lester had been quietly requested to leave Morell's hotel, though she *said* she had found it unhealthy; and that Mr. Campbell of the Cameron Highlanders had been seen drunk in Strada Reale at twelve o'clock in the day.

Mr. Taylor even knew considerably more than there was to know.

The opera was of course a splendid place for observation. It was to be confidently calculated upon which box or boxes each officer would be sure to visit in the course of the evening, and in which he would be expected and would not go. If a man made a new acquaintance or neglected an old one, it was a subject for prompt and interested comment.

Miss White and Mr. Taylor went the round of the opera house conscientiously, and resurrected old scandals and discovered new ones to their hearts' content. They came to Gerty Ruskin-Boyd in time, after an exhaustive discussion of a few of her father's latest escapades.

"She's got herself nicely talked about!" said Mr. Taylor, looking across at the Ruskins' box.

"A girl always does, if she throws herself at a man's

head," said Miss White, virtuously. "I am really sorry for her now, poor girl. Captain Grant has no eyes for any one but Mrs. Bell. How miserable she looks! There, her mother spoke to her and she half turned her back. She has a temper, that young lady!"

"Do you remember that afternoon we saw her on the library roof, talking across to Grant, when he was on guard?" said Mr. Taylor.

"Now there mightn't be much harm in that," said Mrs. White. "It doesn't look well from the street, I grant you, but the girl might do it without thinking any harm."

It must be acknowledged that Mrs. White had a guilty sense of finding Mr. Taylor's gossip amusing, though she frequently made kindly protest.

"Oh, that's nothing," said her daughter, hastily. "Do you remember, Eddy, when we came upon them at tea at Blackleys?"—Miss White apparently forgot that upon that occasion she and Mr. Taylor had also been alone—"and once, when we found them miles out in the country—*walking!*"

Mrs. White again remonstrated.

"When you come to think of it, there's not much more harm in walking than in riding and driving."

"And at the last ship dance, she and Mr. Grant were on that upper part of the deck for ages, and he pretended he couldn't come down the ladder because of his kilt!"

"I have heard worse stories than that," said Mr. Taylor, lowering his voice invitingly.

"Oh, do tell me," said Miss White, but Mr. Taylor intimated that the occasion was too public.

"A girl like that is an astonishment to me!" said Miss White, in meditative tones; "how she *can* make such a fool of herself! One would think she must know that all the men are laughing at her behind her back."

Here one of the men at the back of the box was overcome with mirth.

"Somehow or other, I have always been able to get on with men; I am sure I don't know why. Good gracious! there are Mrs. Pratt and Captain Jones-Parry alone in a box again—what *can* her husband be thinking of!"

In this new interest, poor Gerty temporarily escaped.

In the meanwhile, Gerty was not troubling herself much about outside observation. She was having a very dull evening, and a very anxious and unhappy one.

She had begged and implored her mother to take her to the opera that evening, Lent though it might be, till Lady Ruskin, against her conscience as a good Catholic, had given in. She had extravagantly put on her prettiest dress, and had made her maid do her hair three separate times before she was satisfied. And she would have done better to stay at home.

Captain Grant had known she was coming; with a desperate effort to ignore to herself any remissness on his part during this last week, Gerty had sent him a little note, as he had often begged her to do before. Then, she had always laughed lightly, and said that writing was too much bother, and that if he did not think it worth while to come on the chance, he might stay and play whist at barracks; now she had sent him a note unasked.

And he had never come near her the whole evening.

She had seen him come in, in the middle of the first act, with Gordon, and take his seat with the rest of the regiment. He had not looked towards their box and bowed, as he had always done before.

At the end of the first act he had got up, walked to the door, and taken a meditative survey of the house, looking so many times handsomer than any man there, Gerty had said to herself. She had watched him disappear, full of hope, and had sat for the next five minutes in eager expectancy of a tap at the box door. One or two had come, but not his.

Then she had seen him appear in the Bells' box, which was just opposite. Mr. Bell rose to give him a seat, and after a few words had been exchanged he went out; then Grant took a chair next Mrs. Bell, and bent his handsome head over hers, and played with her fan in the very way he had often done with Gerty's.

Gerty sat and looked on, flushing and paling, bursting into nervous speech with intervals of strained silence, watching him with the eagerness of hope deferred.

Every movement he made *might* be preliminary to getting up to say good-by.

Lady Ruskin watched her. She could see everything and she could do nothing. She tried every now and then to call Gerty's attention to the stage, knowing, as she did, how absolutely the girl was putting herself at the mercy of Malta gossip.

But Gerty was only longing, counting the minutes to the end of the act, when it might be concluded Captain Grant's unconscionably long visit to the Bells would end.

"Perhaps—how stupid she had been!—*probably*—they had asked him to their box, and he could not in politeness get away sooner. Surely he would come during the next act. He had said often that half the pleasure of the opera was to be with some one who was "*sympatico*," and that she was very "*sympatico*."

When the act ended, Grant got up. He stood for a long time talking to Mrs. Bell. In answer to something he said, she gave him a flower from her bouquet, with a laughing reference to her husband, who had just come in.

Even when the box door was opened, she called Grant back to say something—evidently something amusing, for they all laughed a great deal.

But at last the door finally closed behind him, and in breathless impatience Gerty waited, Gerty and her mother, too.

There was a tap at the box door.

Gerty turned with shining eyes, and a voice that could not say "Come in" quite steadily.

And Andrew McLeod came in.

A look of absolute despair came into the girl's shallow blue eyes.

McLeod took the chair next her—the chair she had kept, half hidden by her dress, reserved for Grant. Now if he came, he must sit beside her mother. Oh, it was too bad of Andrew!

McLeod saw he had incurred Gerty's displeasure, but he had no idea in what way he had offended; he had taken the chair beside her entirely with a wish to be kind, as personally he found his cousin supremely uninteresting.

But Gerty need not have been annoyed—Grant never came.

Gradually, as the long acts of the Cavalleria Rusticana

followed one another, her feverish impatience changed into strained despair.

She would not listen to her mother's proposal that they should go home, answering her with sharp rudeness.

Grant went in and out of boxes, raising faint, desperate hopes in her heart, only to be dashed to the ground. He even went back to the Bells, and spent another half act with them, but he never came near the Ruskins' box; and, as the evening wore on, Gerty grew more and more incapable of hiding her misery.

Her father, who had been making a round of boxes all evening, like the jovial old gentleman he was, rallied her upon her gloomy looks, and received such a bitter retort that he stared at her.

Gerty had never felt miserable in all her life before, and she did not like the sensation.

It was not Captain Grant's fault that they met at all that evening—rather his misfortune.

Mr. Grant of the Dauntless had, in festive mood, invited a selection of guests to supper at the Grand Hotel after the opera, and his supper innocently included both the Ruskins and his brother.

He even was so far from being up to date as to place Grant and Gerty side by side.

Grant was quite equal to the occasion.

"What did you think of Cavalleria Rusticana?" he said. "A trifle long, isn't it?"

"What is the matter with you?" said Gerty.

Captain Grant knew the carrying properties of her voice well, and looked round with misgiving.

"Matter?" he said—"nothing. What will you have?"

"I don't want anything," said Gerty. "I want to know if you are offended about anything. Why are you so different?"

"I am certainly not offended," said Grant, smiling agreeably, "and I am sorry if I am different. I really think you had better have some chicken; and you are turning your back on that fellow next to you."

Gerty looked at him as he stroked his moustache and smiled upon her with determined indifference.

"Well, will you come for a ride to-morrow?" she said, desperately; "I want to speak to you."

"You flatter me," said Grant, "but I am afraid I am engaged to-morrow—some other day."

Gerty might have realized she need say no more—an older or a wiser girl certainly would.

"Well, the day after?" she persisted.

"I am afraid I can't go this week, but some day next week; we'll settle about it some other time.—Jack, pass the champagne this way, will you?

Captain Grant was rather angry and annoyed with Gerty. What was the use of bothering about explanations? Could she not take a hint and quietly drop the thing? What was the sense of making herself disagreeable, and insisting on having everything in black and white?

There was Lady Eva Wrench—a sensible girl. She had never even shown that she had noticed any change in his manner, and so when they did happen to meet now there was no discomfort about it.

But after this, he would certainly keep out of Gerty's way.

If he had proposed to her or in any way committed himself, it would have been different; but just for a few tender words, and an occasional caress—he did not count an unlimited temporary devotion—to make all this fuss and put on these tragedy airs!

"If you don't want to be friends any longer," said Gerty, "just say so; but what is the *reason?* You used to like talking to me, and now you only want to get away. You used to say you would rather talk to me than to any one. I only want to know what the reason is."

"Don't talk so loud," said Grant, hastily. "It is absurd to ask me for the *reason.* If I don't talk to you, I suppose it is because I have found somebody I like talking to better."

There, he was very sorry, but she would have plain speaking, and he only hoped she would not burst into tears and make a scene.

She did not. Instead, she suddenly brightened up, with a pink spot in her cheeks.

"All right," she said; "that's all I wanted to know.

Hang it! doesn't your brother know better than to give the leg of a chicken to a lady?"

"Thank goodness!" said Grant to himself. He was delighted to be able to turn to the girl on his left.

Gerty was excitedly gay. She believed she had deceived everybody—that no one but she and Grant knew anything of what had passed, and pride and excitement kept her up. There would be time enough to realize it all later on.

But, of course, nobody was deceived. Everybody in the room knew all about it, and had prophesied it for some time.

Lady Ruskin was not a much better actor than Gerty; her anxious looks towards her daughter, her eagerness to go home, and her chilly good-night to Grant were all easily read.

It would have been better to have parted from Gerty that night in silence, but she could not.

When they were at home together, after many anxious looks at her daughter, Lady Ruskin spoke, and knocked down the poor little barrier of pride which had been Gerty's one comfort and safeguard from despair. She had disgraced herself in Grant's eyes, but till then she had had the foolish hope that nobody else knew.

"Gerty dear," Lady Ruskin said, gently, "I don't think we will ask Mr. Grant any more."

Gerty flared up.

"And why not? It is all very well for you to talk, mamma, but it is all your fault—all! You kept me at home in Lent, and of course he met other people, and of course —I mean it is annoying to feel you have fallen out of it. I told you that would happen. It's all your fault!"

And Gerty fled away upstairs to shed the bitterest tears she had ever known in her happy, shallow young life.

As for Captain Grant, he went back cheerfully to barracks. He had nothing to reproach himself with—he had never asked Gerty to marry him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHRISTINA had come to tea with George on board the Dauntless.

She had been across the Grand Harbour to pay some calls, and had stopped at the Dauntless on the way back by special arrangement.

They had had tea in George's cabin with Mr. Grant, who had just come on board to keep the dogwatch, and then he had gone on deck, and Christina had unfortunately happened to remark that if George had been a lieutenant, she would often have brought her work or a book on board when it was his watch.

George chose to twist this speech into a veiled sneer at his rank as engineer; he had developed a habit of taking the most innocent remarks up wrongly of late days.

Christina not unnaturally felt herself somewhat silenced. She sat playing with a biscuit, and looking out thoughtfully through the porthole at a small rounded picture of steps and houses.

"Well," said George, "I wish you hadn't come if you are going to look so miserable."

"I don't feel miserable, but you've snubbed away all my conversation. Shall I make you pretty new shades for your electric light, George, or would you like a lot of spangly ballet girls, with transparent petticoats, like those Mr. Grant has in his cabin?"

"Oh, I don't want you to bother making conversation for me," said George; "you are bored, I can see that, now you have only me to talk to."

"My dear George, I can't be perpetually grinning broadly or dancing the *pas de quatre* through the cabin," said Christina, rather impatiently. "If you are going to take up everything I say wrongly, don't you think I had better be silent?"

"You are awfully unkind, Kitty," said George, pettishly. "As long as Grant is there, you can talk and laugh well enough, but I am not worth bothering about. At the dance last night——"

Christina laughed a little, not very comfortably.

"I thought we should come to that," she said. She had not an absolutely clear conscience, and yet she could not feel George to be entirely in the right. He had allowed himself to become so excited the night before, and had laughed and talked so loudly, and been almost rude to her publicly.

"Well, you must know it is not the thing for a lady to sit out a dance at the club with a man who is not at the dance—not dressed even."

"Now, George, Captain McLeod was fully dressed—in fact, you must admit that trews are a more complete dress than a kilt."

"I am not joking, Christina. It wasn't the *thing*. It made people talk, and goodness knows they do that without any excuse. You know quite well that I have something to complain of about that young man. Why, this morning, when we met the regiment marching, I *saw* him smile at you."

In spite of herself, Christina laughed a little.

"What an appalling accusation! You ought to report him to the colonel. But as for me, I never know one man from another in those helmets."

She was weary of the subject—weary of the constant recurrence of McLeod's name, and the constant disagreements that followed.

"It is perfectly absurd to be jealous of Captain McLeod, poor fellow," she ended, rather impatiently, but realizing while she spoke that it was impossible for George, who knew nothing, to see McLeod with her eyes. Some day perhaps he would understand.

She had succeeded in making him thoroughly angry for the moment.

Jealous? What in the world was she talking about? *He* jealous? Was there ever such a ridiculous idea?

"Ridiculous indeed," said Christina, artfully, "when we shall be going home so soon, and probably never see any of them again."

He visibly brightened.

"Kit," said he, in a more friendly tone, "I think I may go to Cook's and take your passage any day."

Christina gasped. She had been talking vaguely of

going home, but as an immediate prospect the idea took away her breath.

George proceeded calmly to light his pipe as he went on speaking. He liked Malta better than most men, but change and movement had become, through long custom, completely a matter of course to him.

"You see, if the Dauntless goes to England to pay off, we shall start about the 18th of April; and you had better leave a little sooner, so that I can shut up the flat and arrange everything for you."

"And so that you are not left in Malta alone," Christina knew he added mentally.

"Somehow I hadn't begun to realize it was so near," she said, in a low voice.

What would going to England mean? Would it be more endurable than life at Malta with George, or would it be worse?

Where were they to live till he got his next ship? Would she be asked to stay with her father and mother, and could she bear to go there with George? She could fancy her mother's raised eyebrows at all his vulgarities, her politely veiled sneers which he would never see.

George spoke as if in answer to her unasked question.

"Will you write to my mother, Kitty, or shall I? I think we ought to go and stay with her first."

His mother! A feminine edition of George—probably, as she was of an earlier generation, *worse*. Perhaps fat and untidy, like Mrs. White.

His mother and sisters had a shop, and not a very flourishing one, in Manchester.

There had been something delightfully radical in Christina's once sublimated ideas of that shop. She knew Lady Margaret Dalison, who was an established society dressmaker, and was applauded by all her friends in consequence, and she had once gone for afternoon tea to a refreshment *café* started by some girls, whose father had mightily smashed in aristocratic fashion over horse-racing.

She had fancied something of the kind to herself for George's mother, but now, she told herself, she knew better.

But he was perfectly right; it was impossible to object

to his very natural proposal, unless, indeed, she made up her mind to object to him altogether.

"I will write if you like, dear," she said, and a moment afterwards she added, "How long do you expect it will be before you get your next ship?"

"I want to talk to you about that," said George, with a little nervousness in his manner. "Supposing I don't get a home appointment next time? I ought to, but supposing I don't?"

Christina was silent; she listened breathlessly.

"For instance, if I am appointed to a ship going to China again, or Australia or even Halifax—what about you?"

She could hardly answer.

"I should have to stay at home," she said; "but surely, George, that's not possible."

"At best," said George, slowly, "it only means a year or two at home, and it's very little money."

Christina had succeeded in enlarging his ideas in one direction, and that under the circumstances an undesirable one. A few months ago he had considered his £180 a year, added to her £400, quite a satisfactory income.

"I'll tell you what I have been meditating, old child," he said; "what would you think if I got something to do at home? There are my mother and sisters, Kitty; they need a man to look after them, and they would be first-rate company for you. I am sure you would like them. Of course, they could drop the shop. Mother has a little money of her own, and one of the girls is a lady clerk in the post office. What would you say to settling down close to them, or even in the same house, if you liked each other."

Christina was glad that he had gone on speaking for so long; it had given her time to collect her thoughts and to control her voice before she had to speak. It was such a complete downfall and destruction of all her hopes—something so much worse than she had ever feared.

"But wouldn't you hate to leave the navy?" she said, in a low voice.

George put down his pipe and came over to her, putting his arm caressingly round her, and raising her face to kiss her heartily.

She kept herself rigidly from shrinking away from him. It had come to such a pass with her that his very nearness and touch were disgusting.

"Darling old child," he said, "you don't know how fond I am of you. I am not going to be without you for another three years. We'll stay at home and be Darby and Joan together—eh, old woman?"

His paroxysm of jealousy had evaporated. It was only at times that his curious awakened love for his wife pierced through his armour of vanity. At others, even his consciousness of the gossip of Valetta, his knowledge of Christina's unaccountable and unconquerable predilection for Captain McLeod, could not disturb him. And always after a fit of jealousy he was more effusively affectionate than ever.

"Darling mine, we'll have a nice little house next door to the old mother's, and we'll have a few nice people to come and see us in the afternoons, and the sisters in and out. Manchester is quite a gay place—lots of fun and nice people."

Christina's heart sank.

George beamed upon her.

"Some old flames of mine there. You won't be jealous, old child? Just think, only three weeks more in Malta; isn't it ripping?"

Only three weeks more, and then George's friends to be hers for the rest of her life! Could she bear it, or could she be cruel enough to George not to bear it?

CHAPTER XIX.

"I SAY, Tommy, stop a minute, will you? Where are you posting to?"

McLeod paused, looking very hot and full of business. The second quarter of a polo match, army *vs.* navy, was just over, having ended with a triumphant goal, which he had made all by himself, and he was proportionably elated.

"I'm going to have a drink, of course," he said; "if you had been playing polo in this wind and dust, you wouldn't ask."

"I have a message for you from Adams," said McFerran. "He told me to ask you if you would go and see a fellow from your company who is in hospital. He's afraid he won't pull through, and he's always asking for you."

McLeod started.

"Sergeant Malcolm?" he said. "Why I saw him on Thursday, and he was getting on splendidly."

"Well, there's something gone wrong with his arm, and Adams says if his life is to be saved it must come off, and the man won't agree. It's a pity of him; he was a smart young fellow and very steady, wasn't he?"

"He knew his work better than any other man in my company," said McLeod. "I shouldn't have been surprised if Malcolm had got a commission some day."

"His soldiering is over in any case," said McFerran; "but there's a good chance of his life, and Adams thought perhaps you would go and talk sense to him. The nurse tells him he's always quoting 'the captain.'"

McLeod stood meditatively, smoking a cigarette, with his hands in the pockets of his long overcoat.

"All right," he said; "I'll go after the match. But I don't know whether my advice and Adams's will be the same."

McFerran went back to the crowd of spectators, and McLeod went on for his drink, which was necessarily a somewhat hurried one.

Then it was time for the next quarter. There was pleasure to be got out of life still, he knew, when he felt Nur-el-din bounding about under him, full of eagerness.

The others enjoyed themselves in a comfortable, moderate way. They did not know the intensity it added to a pleasure to feel always that it might be yours for the last time. None of them could enjoy the excitement of the struggle, the mad gallop of many horses, the triumph of victory, as he did.

McLeod had never played before as he played that day. He was always ready, his strokes never failed to be well given and steady.

When the match was over, and everybody proclaimed that the victory of the army was practically due to him, he knew it was true.

The Camerons were immensely delighted. McLeod had been the only man chosen out of their regiment; they had known that he was always particularly well mounted, and that he was a steady and unselfish player, and never lost his head, but they had scarcely expected him to distinguish himself so signally.

They crowded round him as he got off his smoking pony.

"Well done, Bones, for the honour of the regiment!" said Gordon.

"Those naval chaps were working for a beating. I am glad they have got it."

"Very much astonished they are, too! They thought they had nothing to do but to go in and win."

"Kerr was in bad form, and Osborne was hampered with that new pony of his, or we would hardly have worked that last goal," said McLeod.

"Perhaps Ananias will be convinced they weren't so entirely blind to their own interests when they chose you instead of him," said Seton-Kerr.

"Though he doesn't consider polo worth playing out of England," said Gordon, with an adoption of Grant's grandest manner.

McLeod dismissed Tommy III, with a word to his groom, and went over to the pavilion with the others, still with the excitement of the game upon him.

When he came out of the dressing room later on, he found Grant and a number of the others standing round discussing the match.

Grant was in one of those moods which had gained him his nickname in the regiment.

"Decent polo out of England is past praying for," he said, dismissing the possibility with a wave of his hand. "I tell you, last leave I played in a match at Hurlingham that would make Kerr or any of the chaps here sit up."

"I haven't a doubt of it," said a sailor, with warm approval. "I believe he thinks none of us ever played polo in England but himself," he added as an aside.

Grant continued to lay down the law.

"Hardly a fellow here has any idea of the game. Their one idea is to hit the ball."

"I have no doubt you can give us all points."

"Oh, I don't say *that*," said Grant, modestly; "but I was at a match this autumn——"

And here he launched into a glowing and impossible account, which the others found amusing.

The Camerons always marvelled that after long years of persistent snubbing, Grant was still capable of these outbreaks, which they found very objectionable.

McLeod was not listening, and was making an arrangement to ride one of his late opponents' horses in the Easter races, when he suddenly caught his cousin's name.

"Nothing in it, I assure you," said Grant, twisting his moustache and smiling consciously. "Miss Ruskin-Boyd was very civil to me—very *kind*, in fact. She is a jolly little girl, but to tell you the truth——"

"Grant," said McLeod, very politely, "would you mind coming outside for a minute? I want to speak to you." In the inclosure he turned on him sharply.

"Look here, I'll thank you to drop my cousin's name," he said. "I have heard you speak of other ladies quite sufficiently to my disgust, but if you don't take my advice in this case, you'll be sorry for it."

Grant stared at him. "What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that you have behaved like a cad to my cousin, and that if it is in my power to prevent it—and I think," said McLeod, slowly, "it *is*—her name is not going to be tossed about among a lot of men by you."

Grant gave him an unpleasant look.

"You'll find your cousin has rather left her name at my mercy," he said. "She has been so kind as to give me —a great deal of encouragement."

"Say that again to me or any one else," said McLeod, "and I shall know how to answer you."

Grant coloured hotly. If he had noticed McLeod, he would certainly not have used Gerty's name in the pavilion, and, being naturally very good-tempered, at another time he would probably have apologized. But the slight, constant soreness of jealousy he felt towards McLeod was in-

tensified for the moment by the polo match that afternoon.

"Of course," he said with a sneer, "no one could doubt your *pluck*, McLeod."

But he did not repeat his words, all the same, being quite conscious that the other man looked dangerous.

The sneer went home. McLeod forced himself to make no answer. He was afraid of himself.

"You may well talk!" said Grant; "for all you are so tender of your cousin's name, you have made Mrs. Stoddart's very common property."

"What do you say?"

"Surely you don't wish me to believe you are not aware that you and she are the talk of Malta. You have been seen with your arm round her waist, and——"

"You had better not repeat any more vulgar lies to me," said McLeod, in a dangerous voice. Whatever he did, he must restrain himself. It was absurd to heed what Grant said. Everybody knew his reputation.

There had been a good deal of suppressed ill feeling between them for some time. Grant knew that in any open rupture he would get the worst of it—all the fellows would be sure to side with McLeod.

He did not venture to follow up his attack any further, but he was desirous of making himself as disagreeable as he could.

"It is absurd to stand here, scolding at each other like a couple of women," he said, with a lofty smile. "I should just like to say one last thing to you, as I don't burn for another talk like this. If my subaltern is a chum of yours, as I believe, I wish you would see to him. I have done his work several times, and overlooked a lot, but, if he goes on as he is doing, I shan't stand over him much longer."

"I have nothing to say to the affairs of your company," said McLeod, with finality.

He turned his back on Grant, and walked slowly over to Seliba's.

McFerran had lent him his pony to ride round to hospital.

His good spirits and enjoyment of life had gone in a sudden, complete way, which had been quite unknown to

him before the last few weeks. He was naturally a calm, even-tempered individual, and these quick changes showed clearly that all was not well with him.

As he rode to hospital, Grant's words worried him. It was true enough. He saw plainly that he had behaved like a selfish brute to Mrs. Stoddart. He had considered himself so completely beyond all possibilities of marriage or love with any woman—so completely set apart from other men—that he had forgotten that people who did not know would not think the same.

But he ought not to have forgotten. If he had not been so engrossed with himself and his own troubles, he would not.

There had been an evening—a warm moonlight evening ever so long ago—when he had realized that Christina and he had reached a dangerous point in their friendship. He had done his duty then; he had told her the truth, and put himself out of court forever with her. But when she knew, he had forgotten that other people did not. He could see her difficulty quite well. She had not liked to check him as she would have checked another man. And he had taken advantage of her kindness.

He had behaved a thousand times worse than Grant, whose proceedings he had viewed with such disgust.

He did nothing but harm to every one he came across. There was Campbell, too; he had taken him up and made a friend of him purposely, and then, when for the first time Campbell's failing interfered with his pleasure, he had thrown him aside.

Even Sergeant Malcolm—it was in his service and in preparation for his play that the man had had his arm broken.

It would be justice undoubtedly to take his own life. Of what use was it to him or any one else?

McLeod rode up to the hospital gate with a puzzled frown on his face. He was so engrossed as almost to have ridden past it, and for quite a minute he could not remember what he had come for.

Sergeant Malcolm was a great deal worse; he could see that.

The last day McLeod had seen him he had been able to

sit up in bed and read the paper; now he was lying back, flushed and feverish, and evidently in pain.

He was a good-looking, slight young fellow; McLeod had considered him the smartest and most trustworthy man he had, and he had always distinguished himself at company and regimental sports and football matches.

He was one of the most enthusiastic admirers of "the captain," and his face brightened at once when he saw McLeod come in.

"How did the match go yesterday, sir?" he said, eagerly.

McLeod drew a chair up to the bed, and gave a few words of description to the regimental football match of the day before.

"But that is not what I came to talk about, sergeant," he said. "I am awfully sorry to hear you are worse. What is the meaning of it? I thought you were getting on first-rate."

"So I was, sir, but there's somewhat gone wrong in the arm—I don't rightly mind what Dr. Adams calls it. But he says it must come off."

"Yes," said McLeod, gravely; "and don't you think it is very foolish of you not to consent, when he tells you it is the only way to save your life?"

The man hesitated for some time before he answered, moving his hot face restlessly upon the pillow. He was very anxious to make his captain understand exactly how the proposal looked to him.

"It's this way, sir. If I let my arm go and get cured, what's to become of me? They won't have me back in the army again. I'm a carpenter by trade, and what could I do at that without a right arm? There would be nothing for me but the workhouse when I got home, and, indeed, I'd sooner die with the arm on me. I don't like to go against what you think right, sir, and I won't, but that's how I look at it."

McLeod listened gravely and thoughtfully.

"There is a great deal in what you say. But you have friends, haven't you?"

"That I have, sir—an old mother, who'll be heart-broken over this, and there's a girl I was to have married

when my time was out. But I am not going home to sit down and let them work for me."

"Upon my word, I can't help thinking you're right," said McLeod; "though I daresay we are both wrong, Malcolm. I don't see how you could go home and sit down upon your mother."

"I knew you would understand, sir," said the young fellow, eagerly; "the others all talk to me about its being my duty to keep my life, and they said you would, too. But I knew you'd understand. I said: 'If the capt'n thinks it right, you may take my arm when you like; but if he don't, my arm and I take our chance together.'"

"But I should have hardly liked to speak out if I hadn't something to propose," said McLeod. "Look here, Malcolm, I want you to let your arm go, and I'll make it all right for you; I swear I will. I'll start you in whatever line you like, and see that you keep afloat. You can trust my word, can't you?"

"Oh, sir——"

"You needn't be grateful. It's only a pension for wounds on active service," said McLeod, laughing. "It was in my service you went up that ladder. Will your young woman have you without an arm?"

"That she will, sir!" said Malcolm, with great decision.

McLeod laughed again.

"I am sure I am very thankful to you, sir," Malcolm began, with an effort at enthusiasm. He had stolidly and obstinately made up his mind to keep his arm, with a certain doubt of the doctors to encourage him, and this sudden reversal did not give him entire pleasure. He looked upon losing an arm with all the special horror of his class, and had secretly hoped to keep both his arm and his life.

But whatever the Captain desired should be done—that, amid all the fever and confusion and pain in his mind, stood out quite clear and distinct.

Only he would just as soon have taken his chance.

"It would have been suicide, you know, Malcolm. Hasn't the priest told you how wrong that is?" said McLeod, with an odd look of curiosity at him.

Sergeant Malcolm unhesitatingly made a distinction.

"I don't rightly see that, sir. It wasn't taking my own life, but trying to keep the limbs that it was God's will to give me."

McLeod did not argue the point. He got up and said good-by.

"Is there anything I can send you, Malcolm?"

"Nothing just now, thank you, sir; but I would like to know when they will take my arm."

"Think of that young woman of yours, and that will keep you up to the point," said McLeod, and the young man's eyes brightened.

"I won't forget my promise, Malcolm. I will arrange something for you at once, in case—well, in case anything should happen to me—one never knows."

McLeod had got into a morbid way of viewing everything with relation to himself, which was quite unnatural to him.

As he rode back to barracks he thought a good deal about Sergeant Malcolm. Was it courage or stolidity that had made him so ready to face death? If McLeod had been in his place, he thought he would not have been willing to give in so easily. He would have let his arm go, and managed to make a living for himself somehow.

But that was all very easy to *say;* he was not facing his own trouble so bravely.

But if he had had a girl at home waiting for him?

How that young fellow's eyes had lighted up when he spoke of her! With what confidence he had said, "That she will!"

If there had been somebody like that for him, McLeod almost felt as if he could have conquered fate.

What would it have been like to feel that he was riding home to be warmly welcomed by a woman who loved him, to whom he and his pleasures and troubles meant the whole world? he thought, as he rode through the gate into Valetta in the dusk.

Supposing he could turn down the Strada Mezzodi—just supposing—and go into a brightly lighted room, with some one like—well, perhaps with brown eyes, fair hair, and a soft voice like Mrs. Stoddart?

He had shut himself out voluntarily from home life—

had he been a Quixotic fool to do so? Would it have *saved* him?

With an undefined impulse, he turned his pony into the Strada Mezzodi, and rode slowly past the Stoddarts' windows. There was light shining out through the closed shutters of the drawing room.

McLeod looked up, with eyes that could see into the room beyond, and he saw himself there, the centre of a home of his own. It was all quite vivid and real to him.

Then he cursed himself for a fool, and turned and rode back into the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

"I HAVEN'T seen you for an age," said Lady Eva Wrench, in her most friendly tone. "I am sorry to hear you are leaving Malta almost immediately."

"Next Sunday," said Christina.

"You see," George put in, blandly, "the Dauntless leaves for home on Monday, Lady Eva, and I don't think it would be pleasant for a lady to remain in Malta without a gentleman to look after her."

Christina seemed to have been hearing these three remarks over and over again all afternoon. Everybody asked her when she was leaving, and expressed regret; she always gave the date with a sinking heart, and George added a complacent little explanation.

Lady Eva varied the usual order of things a little by expressing a wish that Christina would come to Morrell's, stay three weeks longer, and go home with them. There would be the Easter races and shooting for the Pembroke cup, and quite a number of ship dances.

Christina drew a long breath at the impossible, delightful idea of three free weeks, but she knew it was impossible.

Then Lady Eva was absorbed by half a dozen men, and somebody else came up and asked Christina when she was leaving Malta.

It was a very hot April day. There was hardly any-

thing worth calling a breeze, even down at the Marsa, where a *Gymkhana* had collected everybody from Valetta. Brown holland and white duck were the order of the day among the dwindled groups of ladies who still remained in Malta.

The tourist season was almost over, and the womenkind still remaining were waiting, said ill-natured club gossip, to go home with the officers on first leave, help to crowd the ships, and generally make nuisances of themselves.

Mr. White had been sent off to the Levant, and his wife and daughter had gone home, much against their will. The Ruskins were remaining till May, by Gerty's commands, and she was more paramount than usual now, if that were possible, by reason of her troubles. The Wrenches had not gone, either; report said that they only intended to leave Malta in time for Lady Eva's marriage in June, as a London season just then presented for them insuperable difficulties of a financial nature.

Good-bys were in the air; everybody was asking everybody else when they were going home, and people who knew each other were arranging to travel in the same ship or to meet again in England.

But Christina's good-bys were, she said to herself, as final as if she had been going to heaven instead of to Manchester, which was equivalent only in the sense of being totally out of the range of society ideas.

Her last fortnight had gone with dismaying quickness. She had wanted to get the utmost possible pleasure out of it as her last, but the Fates had seemed to conspire against this—helped, indeed, by the very feverishness of her desire not to waste the days.

George and she had both counted the hours with very different feelings, and always he had been glued to her side.

This was Thursday, and on Sunday the P. and O. Khedive was to carry her away from Malta. Not one of these people would miss her next race meeting. They would say, as she had heard them say about other people: "Mrs. Stoddart not here to-day? I fancy they have left. I suppose we ought to have called to say good-by, but really——"

Then they would begin to talk of something else, and

she would have vanished away from the lives of all people she had ever known—to Manchester.

"Darling," said George, "this is jolly, isn't it? Don't forget, we are to have all the afternoon to ourselves. Don't you feel a little bit sorry, old child, to think that this day next week we shan't be together?"

Here was the only person in the world to whom apparently she was of any consequence.

Christina was looking very cool and very smart in a white duck skirt and coat, with a pale blue silk shirt and a blue ribbon on her sailor hat. She did not feel cheerful, but nobody could have guessed it, and she looked up at George with a grateful smile.

He was in light clothes, too, and he had exchanged his waistcoat for a cummerband, but, all the same, he was very hot. Great beads of perspiration stood out upon his heated, clean-shaven face, and he wiped them away at intervals with his handkerchief. The programme he was holding had a damp, dirty mark where his fingers had touched it.

And McLeod had just passed on his way to the paddock, looking so thoroughly cool in white racing kit, and pausing for a moment to take her hand in a cool, firm clasp.

He was riding in the polo scurry and in the tandem race, and in the dog race he was running a couple of dogs. Of course he was busy, and equally of course he did not know for certain when Christina was leaving.

But, all the same, even if he had not time to talk to her as usual, it did seem a little odd that Lady Ruskin and Gerty were to nominate his dogs; that in the tie race his tie was Gerty's charge, and that he had asked her to do nothing.

And yet for his sake she was coldly looked upon by many of the ladies in Malta, for his sake Lady Ruskin had greeted her with a stiff and embarrassed bow, and for his sake George was creating himself a very dragon of chaperonage.

What waste it was! After this day it was more than likely that she and McLeod would never meet again, and they might as well have made the most of it. Had she not made one single friend during all those long months at Malta?

Even Gerty, who had once had such an enthusiastic admiration for her, was now so engrossed with her own troubles that she was entirely apathetic over Christina's departure. And if Gerty only knew it, it was a thousand times easier to live without a man one was in love with than to live *with* a man one could not endure—at least, so Christina thought.

It was an afternoon which would have convinced anybody of unimportance as a unit in the world, and she felt that her vanity had been duly chastened, and went home readily after the dog race, noting the experience in her mind with a view to future stories.

For McLeod allowance must be made always.

Was he to disappear out of her life and should she never know the end?

The next day Christina had a great surprise.

She had had a busy morning. She had had an interview with the owner of the flat, and then she and Caroline had begun to make arrangements for a general packing, and George's servant had come over from the Dauntless to be under her orders.

She had seized a moment to write a line to McLeod, giving him the address of her mother-in-law in Manchester, and asking him to arrange that all communications about her stories should be sent there in future. She did not see that anything else could be done, and if George found out, it could not be helped.

She was just hesitating over asking McLeod to call and say good-by, which seemed natural and civil, when George came in, banging the hall door after him and flinging down his cap and stick in a fashion which did not argue good temper.

He began to call Christina impatiently almost before he got into the flat, and he was hot, dishevelled, and breathless.

"Here's a damned mess, Kitty!" he exclaimed, in his loudest voice. "I am sure I told you a hundred times if I told you once not to put off seeing about your passage. And now they tell me at the office they have had a wire from Port Said to say there are only four ladies' berths left on the Khedive, and they can't give you one."

"Do you mean to say that I can't leave Malta on Sunday?"

"I don't know what under heaven to do. I went round to the Clan Line office, but this week they only expect one of their small steamers, with no stewardess and no accommodation for ladies, and the Moss Line don't expect a ship for a fortnight. It is most damnably upsetting, and it would have been all right if you'd only gone to the office when I told you."

"I am very sorry."

"What is the good of saying that, I should like to know? Dearest old girl, I don't know what I am saying, I am so put out. What on earth shall we do?"

"I suppose," said Christina, very slowly, "I shall have to wait a week."

Unconsciously she had been crumpling up her letter to McLeod as she spoke, and it was now reduced to an untidy ball of paper.

Was an extra free week such a relief as to make the whole world look different?

Perhaps this week was all she would have in exchange for the years she had hoped for, but Christina could not think of that now. She could think of nothing but the immediate prospect of freedom and happiness.

If George were to come to her later, and tell her he had succeeded in arranging her passage, she felt that she could not bear it, that she must then and there break free from him.

But he did not. He raged and stormed and swore, but nothing could be done. For another week Christina was fixed in Malta without him.

He suffered a misery of jealousy. His one hope and desire had been to get his wife out of Malta before he must leave it himself. He knew, he felt, though he did not admit it to himself, that his hold upon her was strangely slight, that she was his own, and yet not his own in class or affection or thought. He was the last man in the world to conceal his feelings, and Christina felt filled with self-reproach that she could not prevent her own from rising hourly higher.

It did seem hard on George. He went about with a long,

miserable face, following her from room to room as she packed, and proving decidedly in the way. He summoned her in haste from a half-filled portmanteau to assure him that she would not forget him; he caught her hands when she was sewing up a chair in a canvas cover, and nearly destroyed himself with the packing needle, and at all times and seasons he called upon her to say that she would miss him.

Christina perjured herself freely and unhesitatingly, but was regretfully conscious that he was not entirely convinced by her words—that he had a glimmering of the truth.

She wondered would everything have been different, would she have been able to overlook everything, if George had felt to her when she first came out as he felt now. Now it was too late.

She conscientiously made every effort to feel miserable. She devoted herself to him, and said "Not at home" to everybody, including McLeod, who called on Friday, and she was entirely at George's service.

But, all the same, she counted the hours till Monday. Then she would have ten whole days before her during which there would be no possibility of seeing George, and nearly a week—Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday—alone in Malta.

The time was not very far off when she would have given everything in the world to have had that hoped-for week blotted out of her life.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

With the first movement from the engines of the great ship, the sound of many bands struck on the hot air, and there came a cheer from the shore, answered and re-echoed from ship to ship.

The Dauntless swung slowly round from her moorings, leaving a white track behind her, and the cheering broke out again and again, half drowning the bands. She was decorated gaily with flags, her yards were lined with white-clad sailors, and there was a certain joyful, methodical bustle on her decks: for she was going home.

Christina, sitting in an archway on the Barraca, and making a little solitude for herself with her sunshade, watched the slow motion of the ship through the sunny water with an unexpected feeling of forlornness.

She could not distinguish George with any certainty among the many figures that crowded the deck, but she waved her handkerchief persistently, on the chance that he might see her and be pleased.

Poor George! how terribly he had felt saying good-by, and up to this last moment how madly, irrationally cheerful she had felt!

Now, as the Dauntless grew gradually smaller and smaller and nearer to the mouth of the harbour, she became conscious of a satisfactory sense of depression, growing and increasing till she knew that tears were not very far from her eyes. If George could only have known!

She sat still, approvingly encouraging an increasing melancholy as the ship grew farther away; she was aware

of a limp dejection about her whole figure, which would have been eminently creditable to any wife who was only to be separated from her husband for a few weeks.

The last sounds of the band died away, and the spectators on the Barraca turned homewards. Christina waited till they had all gone; then she walked back by herself, avoiding various acquaintances—back to the deserted flat, where everything that George had not taken with him was packed up to be sent to Cook's, and stored there.

There was no reason in the world why she should not have gone straight to the hotel, instead of coming back to the flat, but this plant of grief was a tender plant, and required every possible cultivation. Christina was very honest, as a rule, and given to despise all false sentiment; her writing had given her a habit of analyzing her own feelings and sensations as well as those of other people; but to-day was an exceptional day.

She sat down upon an empty, hired bedstead, and considered herself with decided satisfaction.

She would write to George at once, and he should have a letter to meet him in England; she would make of her own accord the promise, which he had hesitated so long about asking for, and which she had then carelessly put aside, that she would go nowhere, now that he was not there to go with her; she would devote herself to her writing—though, indeed, there was not much use in that, for to all appearance no publisher was ever going to accept anything of hers again.

It is impossible to say to what depths of depression she might have attained, had not Lady Eva Wrench and her brother just then made an unceremonious entrance. Lady Eva would not have hesitated to disturb a mourner over the grave of his nearest and dearest, had it occurred to her to desire his services or society, and she had certainly no hesitation with Christina, who, however oddly she might choose to conduct herself, could not, in Lady Eva's opinion, feel anything but relief.

She sauntered into the flat, Lord Francis a little in the background, with an absolute confidence that she must always be welcome, and that, if she wasn't, it was all the same to her.

"You must excuse us," she said, "for coming in without knocking, but the door was open, and a couple of men were coming out with a packing box, and when it comes to that I don't consider a place private property any longer."

"Don't you?" said Christina, resentfully.

"No, I don't. You mustn't stay here; I see it is putting you into the blues. Besides, I don't know any more melancholy way of beginning the day than going to watch a ship leave the harbour; it gives me the same sort of feeling as going to a funeral or a wedding, whether you know the people or not."

Christina flushed a little; was it for Lady Eva to show her that she was giving way to sentiment and not to sorrow?

"I assure you," said Lady Eva, "I was on the Barraca quite by accident when the Polyphemus was going out, and, though I didn't know a soul on board, when the bands began to play and the cheering was going on, and people were waving good-bys, positively I found myself ready to cry! So, as I don't cultivate sentimental emotions, I have never gone to see a ship start again."

Christina found herself brightening unwillingly. If all the rest of her life was to be George's, and she had only this short time for herself, why should she waste it? She was ashamed to find she was reminding herself that she had made him no promise.

"I have got a note for you from a friend of yours I met just now in the street," Lady Eva went on.

To her disguest, Christina felt herself colouring up to the roots of her hair. It was absurd—a result of the half-impertinent scrutiny of both the Wrenches.

"It is a note from Captain McLeod," she said, with indignant carelessness, and, to show of how very little importance it was, she broke it open at once. Then for a moment she forgot the Wrenches, she forgot McLeod, she forgot everything except the news in the few words of McLeod's note.

"Dear Mrs. Stoddart," he wrote, "I am delighted to say that I have capital news for you about two of your stories. I inclose you the editors' letters. They don't offer

fortune as yet, but I don't suppose you mind that; and Longmans', at any rate, is a good magazine. I am writing this note in case I miss you when I call, and I hope you will send me a line to say when you are leaving Malta. With best wishes and congratulations,

"Yours very truly,

"ANDREW McLEOD."

Christina did not even try to restrain the sudden joy which flashed into her eyes, but a moment later she became indignantly uncomfortable with the knowledge that it would undoubtedly be wrongly interpreted.

She would have liked to hold out the note to Lady Eva, and let her see how completely formal and ceremonious it was—she even thought of doing so for a moment, but she could not make up her mind to allow her secret to become common property so suddenly.

Let them think what they liked; she at least knew that it was the news in McLeod's letter, and not anything personal to him that made her happy. Then a sudden fear came to her—was she in any way deceiving herself again?

"A very pleasant man Captain McLeod is," said Lady Eva, casually—"when he chooses, that is to say. I want Francis to ask him to dine some day this week. Do you think he will come?"

Christina had a way of taking everything that happened to her as enthusiastically as if it were the most important event of her life; she lived largely in the present, and wasted her emotions recklessly and without sense of proportion.

This week, after several days of expectation, had begun in a curious indifference, but now her spirits had suddenly risen, and the prospect of making the most of every hour and every minute filled her mind once more. She had only one life, and every hour she wasted was a clear loss, never to be made up—and she had wasted so many for George's sake.

She did not write to him that day.

CHAPTER II.

"I AM awfully glad to see you," said Mr. Seton-Kerr, warmly.

He stood on the steps of St. Angelo Fort in the moonlight, and welcomed the two boatloads of men and ladies with much effusion.

He was a cheerful youth, and had found his captain rather depressing company of late, and he was still young enough not to dislike being routed out after his dinner.

"We have come as a surprise party," said Lady Eva, who generally took the lead, whether her sister-in-law was there or not.

Christina was feeling rather uncomfortable and said nothing.

It was one thing to go for a moonlight row in the Grand Harbour, and quite another to end by an impromptu visit to Fort St. Angelo.

But her moral courage, unsupported by her wishes, had not risen to more than a faint remonstrance. Lady Francis Wrench was older and presumably wiser than she was, and Christina would not admit to herself that there was any special objection to her paying a visit to the fort.

"I don't know whether Bones will show, or whether there will be anything to eat, though I can promise you lots of fizz," said Mr. Seton-Kerr, cheerfully.

"We have brought our own supper, thanks," said Lady Francis; "but you don't mean to say Captain McLeod will be so rude as not to appear? We must rout him up if he doesn't, and teach him better manners."

"To tell you the truth, he's been the worst of company lately," said Mr. Seton-Kerr, confidentially, "and that's rather rough luck when he and I are boxed up here *tête-à-tête*. He used to be a fellow that nothing put out, but now he gets into a blue fury over nothing at all, and if I hadn't, as I see you are about to remark, Lady Eva, the temper of an angel——"

"Talking of angels," said Lady Eva, abruptly, "do these steps reach to heaven, Mr. Seton-Kerr, for they seem to go on for ever?"

Christina was quite aware that the conversation had received this sudden turn quite as much in consequence of her presence as because Lady Eva, who hated climbing, found the innumerable steps rather monotonous.

Mr. Seton-Kerr made himself very witty on the subject of lifts, and dropped his remarks upon his captain's oddities, and Christina, who considered him rather an objectionable youth, fell behind with Lord Francis, whom she liked.

If George could see her now!—but he could not; he would never know, and why should she not amuse herself?

At least she must see McLeod. If he did not come, she must send him a message by Mr. Seton-Kerr. It would be only civil—only right, after all the trouble he had taken about her stories.

But McLeod was too instinctively courteous to shirk his duty as host, unwelcome as this noisy party of self-invited guests might be.

He joined them in the messroom, rather pale and grave, but politely anxious to be hospitable.

Christina had not seen him for more than ten days, and she had a great deal to say to him—a number of little stories to tell him, which he would find amusing; especially there were those acceptances of hers to talk about. But there would certainly be an opportunity to discuss everything later on, and at present she was quite content to amuse herself with the rest of the supper party.

McLeod looked very ill; he went over to Lady Eva and talked to her, but with an unusually obvious effort, and he lost the thread of what he was saying once or twice.

The Wrenches had brought their own supper, and all that Fort St. Angelo had to provide was champagne, which was liberally produced and largely appreciated.

Everybody was very festive; they played tiddliwinks with sixpences and wineglasses till Lady Eva made quite a small fortune. Then almost everybody had a trick of some kind to exhibit, connected more or less remotely with wineglasses and forks and coins. After they were tired of this, they went out on the ramparts and played tennis in the moonlight.

Here McLeod and Christina were alone for the first time, in the shadow of a gun.

Everybody had come there at first to see the Grand Harbour and Valetta, silver with moonlight, but only these two remained when the others trooped off to the tennis court with much laughter and noise.

McLeod had not looked down with the rest; he said something about being made giddy, and had stood all the time as he stood now, with his back to the parapet; but he looked vaguely in front of him, and not at Christina.

"I have to thank you," she said, with some hesitation.

She had long ago made up her mind that allowances must always be made for McLeod; but, all the same, she could not forget that he had suddenly ceased to seek her society, and this evening his manner was of the coldest and most indifferent.

"Thank me?" he said, vaguely. "Oh, I remember—yes."

Christina turned on him rather sharply. "What is the matter with you?" she said; "you look half asleep."

"Well, I haven't been to sleep, for a long time—at least I think so," said McLeod.

Accidentally he moved a little out of the shadow of the gun as he spoke, and, as the moonlight fell on his face, everything but a great pity faded out of Christina's mind.

"Can't you sleep? I am so sorry," she said.

"I daresay, if I had that play off my mind——" said McLeod, drawing his brows together in a troubled frown.

"*What?*"

"I hate to fail," said McLeod. He had been speaking straight before him into the distance until now, and Christina had had some difficulty in hearing what he said; but now he turned to her and spoke more naturally.

"Look here, Mrs. Stoddart; when that play came to smash, I thought there was just an end of it, but I know there isn't now. I have been a dead failure all my life, but I have got hold of a plot of my own now—it is a very good plot, I think, and will work. But there's something needed. Something needed, certainly."

"Oh, do tell me about it!" said Christina, eagerly.

"Would you like to know? Well, come to my rooms

and I'll show you, and explain to you what is needed, too."

"But how can I?" Christina indicated the others with a gesture.

"That's all right. They'll be coming later—we'll ask them, if you like," said McLeod.

He had never made a selfish request before, but now what he was asking was decidedly selfish.

But Christina would not refuse. They exchanged a few words with the others; McLeod told them he was going to take Mrs. Stoddart to explore the fort, and after a few sarcastic pleasantries they promised to follow in a few minutes.

They did not explore the fort at all—they went straight to McLeod's room.

He had a big, bare-looking sitting room off a smaller bedroom, both characteristically furnished with more regard to comfort than appearance.

He drew the curtains over the windows, blotting out the moonlight; he turned up the lamp and lighted the candles on the chimney board.

His undress uniform was lying in an untidy heap on a sofa, where he had left it when he was dressing for dinner. He pushed it aside, and came over to Christina, who was inspecting the photographs on the chimney board.

"My mother," said McLeod; "two of my married sisters; the eldest of those two in fancy dress, with a friend of hers; a group of the regiment we had taken not long ago——" he paused.

Christina's eyes lingered longest on the picture of Lady Drumesk, with her worn face and the shadow of a great fear in her eyes, which the photograph somehow managed to bring out. What a terrible life she must have had to bring that look into her face!

Then, glancing over the others, she came to the photograph of a handsome man in the uniform of the 79th, and, without waiting to think, gave a look of inquiry to McLeod.

"Beresford," he said, briefly.

It was a very good photograph. Beresford was half sitting, half leaning on a table, bending a little forward, with

a smile which had not degenerated into a smirk, and life and energy in every line of his face and figure.

"That was taken a week before——" said McLeod; "he had been three weeks dead when the proofs came in."

It must have been a strange thing, and very, very sad, Christina thought, to open those pictures of the dead man for the first time.

How that girl must have loved him! She turned away abruptly, with an instinct of escaping from those happy, careless eyes.

But McLeod, who had the photograph before him always, did not seem to be freshly impressed.

He pulled up his long chair for Christina, and made her sit in it and draw herself back till her feet were off the ground, and she lay snugly among the cushions.

"But the play?" she said.

McLeod's mood had changed. "Never mind that," he said. "Are you comfortable? Take off your hat."

For this one evening she and he seemed beyond the reach of conventionalities, shut away from the rest of the world by the four walls of his room.

Christina obeyed, by instinct ruffling up her hair that it might not lie unbecomingly flat.

"Are you perfectly comfortable?" he said again. "I wish you had some work or something, because——"

There was a long silence. McLeod stood looking at her in a strange, intent way, which made her uncomfortable at once. It was not the gaze of a lover upon the woman he loved; more of a man who saw before him a bit of ribbon or lock of hair or like token of one he had lost for this life and the next.

There was a passion of regret and realization of what might have been in his eyes. But Christina did not even feel sure that he was thinking consciously of her.

It brought her real physical discomfort, and therewith came a sense of awkwardness. She had no natural leaning to disregard conventionalities, and a distinct desire to be thought well of by all the world.

But she did not like to speak first; she fidgeted uncomfortably beneath McLeod's look, and at last he broke the silence.

"What do we look like?" he said.

It seemed to her as if a spell had been removed. She altered her position, and answered promptly and even cheerfully.

"Like very lazy people, I should say. Let us go and look for the others."

"I don't mean that," said McLeod, impatiently; "what I mean is, don't you think we look as if we belonged to each other? Can't you imagine it for a minute? I have almost brought myself to believe—if you had sat still as you were a few moments longer, I should have *quite* succeeded—that you are my wife, and that nobody exists in the world but we two. It's late, you know—past eleven—and here we are, entirely by ourselves, with the lamps lighted——"

He moved his position a little and let his hand rest on hers.

"All these efforts of imagination remind me that I shouldn't be here," said Christina, speaking cheerfully.

It was impossible to get out of this chair gracefully; she proceeded to try and wriggle towards the ground in a manner which seemed inappropriate to the circumstances. She was decidedly frightened. Was it possible that McLeod was going to subject her to the stupid insult of love-making? She would not even give grounds to such a suspicion in her own mind by removing her hand from his with any haste.

She was entirely in the power of a man who, upon his own confession, was not always responsible for his actions. She had often been alone with him before, but never had she felt herself so entirely at his mercy.

But McLeod was scarcely thinking of her personally—more as a realization of home and happiness, of everything he had missed.

"You are not afraid of me, surely?" he said. "I suppose I am rather a brute to talk like this, and you will think I am always trading on my privileges as a mortally hurt man. But, don't you see, I am thinking of you more as a —woman. By Jove! when you have nothing else left, it must be a comfort to have some one to fall back on."

He looked at Christina curiously, and she felt that she ought to say something; but, though many thoughts came to her, none of them would get themselves said.

"Sit down again for a minute or two, won't you?" said McLeod, "and try and look as if you were at home. I am not such a swine as you seem to think, and I make no mistakes about *why* you are so kind to me."

Christina sat down again; a few minutes more could not make much difference, and he did not want her to talk.

But she was glad when they heard the steps of the rest of the party. She rose from her seat, to put on her hat hastily at the glass, and then, as McLeod remained absently sitting where he was, she felt that it might have been better if she had done the same.

The others came in in mad spirits, with many quips and cranks among themselves. Christina felt that she and McLeod stood apart, and he was almost silent.

"You two look fairly comfortable," said Lady Francis Wrench, with a sneer in her voice. "I am sorry we disturbed you, but we really didn't know you were here."

"Have you anything interesting to show us, Captain McLeod?" said Lady Eva—"not Egyptian things, though, for goodness' sake! Mr. Seton-Kerr says you have a lot, and I am so sick of looking at them."

"There are those Edinburgh photos and your racing and football cups," Seton-Kerr suggested; "and I say, Bones, what have you done with those Japanese knives? They were smart things in the murdering line."

"I—don't know," said McLeod. "I am not quite sure."

"You are not quite sure? Well, I am sure I hope no dirty Maltee has got hold of them, or we may get our throats cut some fine night by way of experiment. I assure you, Lady Eva, they look as if they would do the job so clean—no blundering or dirty work—they almost *call* to you to try them!" Mr. Seton-Kerr ended, jovially.

"Perhaps I thought it would be safer to put them out of your way," McLeod returned. He carefully avoided looking towards Christina.

Then Lady Eva disclaimed any desire to see the knives, and, after a little more light and improving conversation, it dawned upon Lady Francis that it was time to go, and they all went down the steps of the fort together.

On the way, McLeod drew Christina aside. The ani-

mation had all died out of his face, and the puzzled, confused look which had been there at the beginning of the evening had come back.

"Before you go," he said, confidentially, "I want to tell you the plot of my play—that is to say, if you yould like to know it?"

"Of course I should," said Christina, readily.

"Well, I thought of this," said McLeod; "I thought of a man who looked all right to everybody, but who was really going—*mad*, and *knew* it himself. Every day, you see, he would know it was drawing a little nearer, and at last——"

In his earnestness, he laid his hand lightly on Christina's arm to draw her attention, and instinctively she drew back with a half-stifled exclamation.

"Oh, how can you talk like that!" she said.

"Do you think it would be too painful?" he said, anxiously; "but there would be strong scenes, especially at the end, but I am not quite sure about that. I think Grant would be the best person perhaps——"

He came to a long meditative pause, which lasted till they reached the quay.

Christina was too bewildered and disturbed to speak. What did McLeod mean? Was it only a ghastly kind of joke? But he seemed so entirely serious and matter-of-fact over it.

CHAPTER III.

Christina dreamed about McLeod that night, and could not get him out of her head all next morning. He came between her and the last and most hopeful child of her imagination, and refused to be dismissed, even temporarily.

There had been very little said about him the night before, though the rest of the party had been freely discussed, and Christina was indignantly conscious that the silence was a tribute to her presence.

But why should she not speak of Captain McLeod as freely as anybody else?

To prove that she could and would, she made some casual and indifferent allusion to him, and Lady Eva followed it up.

"I like Captain McLeod," she said; "he's always so entirely calm and collected; he talks when he likes, and when he doesn't feel in the humour, he's not disturbed by a social conscience like other less fortunate mortals."

"I must say I think he might have gone a little more out of his way to be civil this evening," said Lady Francis, sharply.

"He didn't want us, and though he was too polite to say so, he had no objection to letting us see it. Wasn't that it, Mrs. Stoddart?" said Lady Eva.

Christina restrained herself from making any apology for him with difficulty.

"I don't know, I am sure," she said, shortly.

Apparently these people had noticed no difference in McLeod. Could it have been her imagination that his manner was peculiar?

Once more in her life she felt that responsibility was thrown upon her. She and she alone in Malta knew McLeod's secret, and, except in absolute necessity, she had no right to betray it.

She was so sorry, so dreadfully sorry for him, and their present position towards each other made her exceptionally helpless.

She honestly tried to analyze her feelings towards him, but she knew he was too prominent in her mind for success. A little later, when he had passed out of her life, she would be able to judge better.

She admired him, she liked to be with him, she could not either think of him or talk to him at present without a certain restless excitement which was not unpleasant. But then she would have felt the same to any man in his position; how was it possible that she could meet him, without a great overwhelming pity and an anxiety amounting to terror? She was not, she hoped, an absolute fool, and in her position and his anything but pity and friendship was utterly impossible.

But, all the same, Captain McLeod and his troubles could not successfully be got out of her head.

After several vain attempts to engross herself with her writing, she got up and put on her hat to go out.

There was no one now to question her out-goings and in-comings. George seemed to have gone clear out of her life, leaving nothing behind but a vague sense of relief. Was it possible that they had only parted yesterday?

She tried to interest herself by imagining where he was now, and what he was doing, but it was of no use. He was only a shadow, into which no life could be put, like one or two of Christina's imaginary friends, who had refused to live, and who had therefore been abandoned with their histories half written. McLeod, on the contrary, who had only been intended for a place in the background, seemed inclined to force his way to the position of hero.

It was very hot in Strada Reale, and wise people had got their shopping over and gone home to take life as coolly as possible.

Christina had practically nothing to do; she had thought of going up to the Barraca, but was discouraged by the prospect of the hot walk before she could get there. She had almost made up her mind to take a book and a carriage, and drive round to Sliema to what she and McLeod called "the Waves Point," when she met Campbell unexpectedly, laden with some official-looking blue papers.

His idea was to salute and pass on; he and Christina had never exchanged anything but a bow or a few necessary words since the fiasco at Florian theatre.

But Christina was not thinking about that or about Campbell personally at all. As he passed her the idea struck her that here was perhaps a way of finding out if the time had come when it would be absolutely necessary for his own sake to betray McLeod's secret to somebody.

Mr. Campbell," she said.

Campbell turned promptly.

"Have you seen Captain McLeod lately?" said Christina, going to the point without preliminaries. "Don't you think he looks very ill?"

Campbell himself looked decidedly ill; he had been doing very badly, and consequently the hot weather, which

as yet other people found pleasant, was trying him very much. As Seton-Kerr said, he was in a fair way to get fever, and stop somebody's first leave.

"I haven't seen much of McLeod lately," he said. "You know he and Seton-Kerr are at St. Angelo, and he hardly ever comes over."

"But don't you think," said Christina, persistently, "that he ought to see a doctor—or something? He never sleeps, and, if you have seen him at all, I am sure you must notice a change?"

She did not mind in the least what Campbell thought of her interest; she simply wanted to know if she had in any way exaggerated the change in McLeod, or if other people had noticed it too.

Campbell had turned with her, and they were walking slowly down Strada Reale together.

"Seton-Kerr *did* say something about him this morning," he answered, thoughtfully. "He was complaining that he won't stir outside the fort, except on duty, or for that matter outside his room, and that he's the worst of company, which isn't like Bones. But Seton-Kerr is always grumbling about something, and I just thought McLeod probably didn't find the young cub very amusing."

"There's more than that," said Christina, shaking her head.

"He did tell me one very tall story," said Campbell, still recollecting. "He said a sergeant came to him yesterday in a desperate state and complained that the picket ought to have been in Valetta by this time, and instead of that they were *lost*—absolutely *lost!* And they were eventually discovered locked up in an outbuilding, where they declared they had been disposed of by McLeod. Whereupon Seton-Kerr went to McLeod in dire perplexity, and he seemed inclined to deny it at first, but finally said that they had laughed at him behind his back, and it was the only thing to be done. As if every man in the regiment wasn't his devoted admirer! I don't believe that story, do you, Mrs. Stoddart?"

"I hope it's not true—oh, I hope not!" said Christina, so earnestly that he looked at her in surprise.

"Of course it isn't," said Campbell, easily; "no sane

man would take it into his head to lock up a whole picket summarily, even if he really thought they were laughing at him. But Seton-Kerr vows it's true, and says there will be a row about it at headquarters."

Christina looked at Campbell. No, it was quite impossible to give this feather-headed, foolish boy her confidence, friendly and good-natured as he might be.

"He's coming to dinnner to-night," she said, half to herself. "I can see then. When does first leave begin, Mr. Campbell?"

"Not for another fortnight or three weeks," said Campbell. "Well, I must say good-by, as I have got to take these papers to the general's. I shall be awfully sorry if there is anything really wrong with Bones, though we are not as good friends as we were. He's a very sound chap, Mrs. Stoddart, and a very good chap."

Campbell spoke as if he meant what he was saying, and for a moment Christina wavered again, but before she could make up her mind he had saluted and left her.

To her surprise she met McLeod on the steps of Morrell's. She had not expected to see him till they met at dinner with the Wrenches that evening, and she felt his appearance portended a refusal.

"Aren't you coming to-night?" she said, hastily.

"No," said McLeod. "I sent over a note this morning. But it was not for that I came. I wanted to see you—I went to your room——"

"But I am afraid I can't ask you there," said Christina, colouring a little. "I have only got a bedroom. Will you come upstairs? The Wrenches say I may use their sitting room."

But she was not sorry when he refused.

"Why aren't you coming this evening?" she said. They knew each other so well that it was quite a natural question.

But he did not even answer.

"Do you think I had better go and see Grant now?" he said, anxiously, "or shall I wait till to-morrow?"

"Captain Grant?" said Christina. She was a little surprised. "Do you want to see him? I thought you were not even friends."

"I told you," said McLeod, impatiently, "I am obliged to see him because of the play."

"But are you going to consult him? I shouldn't have thought he was a good person."

"You don't understand. It's for the last scene," said McLeod.

"But won't I do as well? You have helped me so often that I should like to be useful."

McLeod turned to face her, and gave her a long meditative look.

"Would you—would you be willing?" he said, slowly. Then he shook his head. "No, Grant will be best," he said.

They were still standing in the hall of the hotel, but they were as much alone as they could have been anywhere else. It was not a time of day at which anybody who could help it was moving about.

"Captain McLeod," said Christina, speaking with a sudden purpose, "you won't be offended at what I am going to say, I am sure. You asked me once to tell you if the time came when I thought you ought to send in your papers without any delay. I think—I think the time has come."

Sudden tears sprang to her eyes as she spoke. He was such a big, manly fellow, and such a thorough soldier, and he had been a good friend to her.

He did not speak for several minutes, and then his voice was angry and puzzled.

"What on earth do you mean?" he said. "Are you going to insult me too? Will you please say what you mean?"

Christina looked at him with disconcerted, frightened eyes.

"You know that I don't mean to insult you," she said.

McLeod did not look by any means assured of this. He stood pulling at his red moustache after his old habit, and he kept his eyes suspiciously fixed upon her.

It seemed to her that this had been going on for years—that for years she and he had been standing facing each other in the cool hall at Morrell's. She was not afraid of

McLeod, but she was very much afraid of her own words; it was so hard to be sure what was the best thing to say.

"I think, at least," she said, gently, "that it would be better to give up the idea of that play till you get to England——"

"Why?" McLeod caught her up with a quickness which was quite unnatural to him.

"You would have more time—and better opportunities."

"I don't know why you can't speak the truth," said McLeod. "You don't like the subject I have chosen."

"Honestly, I do not," said Christina, gravely. She always hated standing, and she was getting very tired, but she could not allow herself to relax even so far as to lean against the wall.

"Why not?" said McLeod.

"I don't think," she said, hesitating a little and choosing her words and expressions, "that for you of all people——"

He broke in with an exclamation.

"It is just what I expected!" he said. "I do believe you think I am mad!"

For a moment Christina was absolutely staggered; then he broke into a laugh—such a strange mirthless laugh, that it struck with a cold feeling of certainty even on her unprofessional ear.

"Haven't you found out in all these months that I was joking?" he said. "It's very amusing that you should believe it!"

But he did not look amused; he was looking at Christina furtively to see how she took what he was saying.

"Never mind about that, then. I want to know what you mean about Mr. Grant. You'll tell me, won't you? Perhaps I might be able to help you."

McLeod shook his head.

"No," he said. "You will know all about it afterwards, and you mightn't like it. In fact, I am rather sorry it is necessary. I daresay people won't approve."

"Well, then, won't you tell me, and we can talk it over together?" said Christina, urgently.

"At anyrate, you won't turn against me, too?" said

McLeod, wistfully. "Everybody else has. It is terrible to feel that every soul in the world hates you—and rather hard, isn't it?"

"Very hard," said Christina, "but it isn't true."

"You don't know."

"At anyrate, I shall never hate you," she said, steadily.

"Will you stand by me whatever happens?"

"Yes," said Christina, "I will."

"I *think* I can believe you," said McLeod, with a long doubtful look.

"Of course you can," said Christina, cheerfully; "and now I really mustn't stand here gossipping with you any longer."

"I wish you would tell me one thing before you go," said he, anxiously; "it is a perfectly natural question, and you need not look at me like that."

He drew a little closer to her, and let his voice drop to a confidential half whisper. "Do you know what it is to have the same thought whirling round and round in your head till you feel as if it must burst? If I could only stop thinking for half a minute, it would be all right."

"What are you always thinking of?"

McLeod drew back suspiciously.

"Never mind that," he said; "you can't expect me to tell you that! Are you going home next Sunday?" he ended, in a completely ordinary tone.

Whether he had heard a step on the stairs or not Christina did not know, but a moment or two later Lady Eva Wrench appeared, and he seemed to pull himself together, and began to apologize for being obliged to refuse coming to dinner at the last minute in the most ordinary tone of conventional civility.

It was no wonder that Lady Eva, who knew him so slightly, noticed no difference.

CHAPTER IV.

CHRISTINA had barely time to brush her hair and wash her hands, and not to change her dress, as she had intended, before she was told luncheon was ready.

The Wrenches were by no means saving of their pennies though they were poor, and they liked to have people constantly coming in and out, especially now that it was getting hot enough to make it necessary to stay indoors during the early part of the afternoon.

They generally had lunch in a private room, and a few men were always invited to come in. To-day they had asked Christina, and, as Lady Eva had seen her in excellent health ten minutes before, there was no possibility of an excuse at the last minute, though she was far from feeling either hungry or sociable.

She was not a great addition to the luncheon party. Lord Francis, beside whom she sat, found her entirely devoid of conversation, and Grant, who was one of the party, was gratified, and at the same time slightly puzzled, by her suddenly developed interest in him.

Why was it her fate always to be driven to make important decisions on her own responsibility, without any time given to her for consideration?

There were plenty of people, she felt sure, to whom right and wrong did not always appear so inextricably mixed, and who were not absolutely certain to feel afterwards they had done the wrong thing, whatever they decided.

For McLeod's own sake she must surely take some decided step. He himself would have the right to blame her afterwards if she did not.

She went over the whole thing again and again. Who should she tell? How much should she tell? What would be the best thing for McLeod?

There seemed to be something so treacherous in going, unknown to him, to betray his confidence. She had promised not to turn against him. What would he consider this, when he knew?

She woke up with a start to the fact that Lord Francis

had asked her three times whether she would have chicken or mutton, and hastily forced herself to make a few irrelevant remarks.

When one life, perhaps more, depended upon what she made up her mind to do that afternoon, how could she pretend to be excited over a shooting match for the Pembroke cup, or interested in the rumoured engagement of the general's aide-de-camp to his cousin?

What was the right thing to do, and the best thing to do, and was it absolutely necessary that anything should be done at all, or that she should do it? There might come a day when McLeod could turn upon her and accuse her of spoiling his life by her treachery.

If she could only have asked somebody to advise her! But in all Malta there was nobody who could take the responsibility off her shoulders. She was sadly amused at the instinct which came to her to go to McLeod for help.

She found herself watching all Grant's movements anxiously.

When luncheon was over, no matter to whom she was talking, her eyes sought him. As long as he stayed where he was it was all right; but he could not stay there always —in fact, he was certain to leave very soon. And then where was he going to? How was he going to spend the afternoon?

She could not invite him to her bedroom; she could not insist upon the Wrenches keeping him, even if he would stay; and she could scarcely propose herself as his companion for the rest of the day.

Even if she did, she would be obliged to draw the line at the night.

Grant moved his chair, and she lost her way in the middle of a sentence and forgot what she was talking about. As long as she could keep him in sight, she thought she need not absolutely make up her mind.

"He's an awful brute, but he can play polo," pursued Lord Francis. "It's very clever the way he manages to make his one eye do the work of two. Of course you have noticed that he has only one eye?"

"Yes, certainly—that is to say, no, never," said Chris-

tina, vaguely. Was he talking of a man or a horse? She had not the faintest idea.

"I wish I could get a chance like that; it was a case of given away with a pound of tea, and I assure you——"

"Lord Francis, is Captain Grant going?" Christina broke in.

"It looks like it," said he, a little disconcerted; "but as for the pony, it was very lucky for McMurdo——"

"I beg your pardon, but I must speak to him," said Christina, rising hastily.

Her host was a little bewildered; he was not a very observant person, but, to the best of his belief, Mrs. Stoddart and Captain Grant rarely did more than exchange a word when they met.

"Are you going already?" said Christina, hurriedly.

Everybody was a little amused.

"Already?" said Grant, laughing. "Why, according to good manners I ought to have taken myself off an hour ago. But it is very kind of you to find the time so short!"

"Where are you going to? What are you going to do?" Christina persisted.

Grant was somewhat astonished and slightly gratified. He was conscious that he looked very well in his light summer clothes, with a good deal of shirt and a red cummerband. His hair was parted with absolute correctness, his moustache was waxed to perfection, and Lady Eva had presented him with a buttonhole of Parma violets, which made him thankful that he had finally decided on violet scent for his handkerchief that morning. He had had a chance of seeing himself in a glass as he rose from his chair, and was satisfied that he had every right to attract respectful admiration. But Christina, when she looked at him, was not thinking of the beauties of his attire and appearance, though at one time they had had a sort of doubtful attraction for her; she was reflecting how slightly he was made, what a want of strength and muscle there was about him, and how helpless he would be with McLeod.

"Really, you are immensely kind to-day, Mrs. Stoddart," he said, with his most provokingly self-satisfied smile. "I wish I could ask for the pleasure of your society.

But I am engaged for the afternoon, and I am going to tea at the palace."

Christina was too much in earnest even to notice the impertinence of his tone. She had more to consider just now than what people might think of her, and she went on to her next question with barely a hesitation.

"You are not going over to St. Angelo?" she said.

Grant's face fell a little. It was annoying to think that, after all, this anxiety was not for him, but for his services as messenger. "I didn't intend to go," he said; "but I can, if you want it particularly—or at anyrate send a message."

"Oh, no, no!" said Christina, with what she felt to be unnecessary vehemence.

There was absolutely nothing to be done but to shake hands, and say good-by.

Lady Francis, who was popularly known to have gone more than three quarters of the way to meet her husband in his wooing, remarked in an undertone to the man she was talking to that the way that young woman threw herself at men's heads was extraordinary. Poor Captain McLeod had never had a chance of escape, and now it was Captain Grant!

But for once Christina's too acute self-consciousness was entirely blotted out. She did not bestow a thought upon what she had said or upon what people might think of her.

A number of men began to drop in—there were always men at the Wrenches—and comic songs and choruses became the order of the afternoon.

Christina joined in the choruses, and felt it was better than having to make conversation.

What a dreadful thing it would be for McLeod if anything were to happen, and how impossible it would be that she should ever forgive herself! And it was so impossible to tell where Grant was or what he might be doing.

It grew unbearable after a time, and drove her to decision. Something she *must* do, or she herself would go mad.

"Lady Francis, after all, I don't think I'll go to polo

to-day," she said, suddenly. "I have some calls I ought to pay."

She had ended by jumping to an impulsive decision. She would go to Lady Ruskin—Lady Ruskin was a relation, and knew McLeod well.

Christina had not seen much of the Ruskins lately. She knew very well that Lady Ruskin looked upon her coldly, and Gerty had been entirely engrossed with her own affairs.

Lady Ruskin considered Christina a dangerous person; she blamed her for the infrequency of McLeod's visits, and the change in him which she had not been able to avoid remarking. After some inexplicable fashion she had also managed to shift the burden of Gerty's misdeeds to her school friend's shoulders, and the effect of her bad example, and she, too, was the stumbling block interfering with the realization of Lady Ruskin's dreams for McLeod and her daughter.

Men *would* misconduct themselves—it was very deplorable, still they would; but a woman who got herself talked about was not to be forgiven.

Christina had got herself talked about with McLeod.

Consequently, Lady Ruskin withdrew into her shell, and was nervously chilling to her, which that young woman was only too quick to discover.

But these were things too small to consider now. Lady Ruskin was a woman and McLeod's cousin, and it seemed less treacherous to take his confidence to her.

In the ferryboat, having arrived so far upon impulse, Christina began to have many qualms about what she was doing. Supposing what McLeod had said that morning was true, and that it had been all a ghastly joke? Would not Lady Ruskin then conclude that Christina herself was out of her mind?

Or supposing Lady Ruskin would not believe her, or that McLeod found out what she had done?

There was no use in allowing herself to think.

She made a mistake at the Ruskins' door: instead of asking to see Lady Ruskin alone, she allowed herself to be shown up to the drawing room.

There she found her hostess, indeed, but also Gerty, two or three other girls, and half a dozen young men.

Gerty seemed in a fair way of consoling herself. Grant had not broken her heart, but he had perhaps done worse. He had found the girl very young, full of animal spirits, with a character entirely unformed, and possibilities of steadying down into a worthy womanhood.

He had made love to her by voice, behaviour, manner, in every way but in words; he had kissed her once, he had put his arm round her often, and he had taught her to thrill with vague excitement at his touch. Then he had suddenly left her, roused, excited, moved beyond her own understanding.

To a young man in Gerty's case there would only have been a temporary harm, but her girlhood was spoilt. She could not do without the excitement he had brought into her life; for one man it bade fair to become every man.

Christina was too full of other things to try and put herself in Gerty's place; she was only conscious of a sensation of disgust when she saw that the girl liked young Browning to touch her hand, and that she brushed against his shoulder once or twice as they looked over some amateur photographs he had brought for exhibition.

Lady Ruskin's greeting was nervous and distant; she felt anxious and out of place with all these festive young people in her drawing room, but she did not, as would have been natural, make any attempt to talk to Christina.

Christina waited hopefully at first, but nobody seemed to have any idea of departure. They stayed and stayed, and she saw or imagined that the party was complete without her, and that she was rather in the way. She was quite sure Mr. Markham would be late for his watch, and that young Browning would not be able to pay the other two Sliema calls he talked of. They stayed and stayed.

At last she rose desperately.

"Lady Ruskin, I have paid an unconscionable visit," she said, with a nervous laugh; "but might I see you alone for a few minutes?"

Lady Ruskin's hand stopped on its way to the bell, and she looked decidedly astonished.

"Certainly, with pleasure," she said, in a tone of dismay.

Was it Gerty or Ruskin or Andrew? With a quick relief she felt it was probably the latter.

Had the girl come to her for sympathy or help in wrong-doing? If so, she had made a great mistake; in all circumstances it was, in Lady Ruskin's opinion, a woman's duty to shut her eyes and cling to her husband.

In the morning room Christina turned to her with a white face and difficult words.

Lady Ruskin was so gently unsympathetic, and left it so entirely to her to speak.

It was a very difficult to thing to say.

"Lady Ruskin, I want to tell you a terrible thing about Captain McLeod——" She paused in sheer difficulty of speech.

Lady Ruskin was very much afraid she was going to be shocked. "Really, Mrs. Stoddart——" she began.

Christina went on hurriedly. "I feel obliged to tell somebody. It is terribly, terribly sad; but it is not safe that there should not be a watch set over him—he would not think it right himself, I am sure," she ended, wistfully.

Lady Ruskin gave a shrill, frightened scream. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Now that there was no going back, Christina told the whole story steadily enough. It seemed worse as she put it in words, far worse, than when it had been between her and McLeod, and every sentence seemed to build and strengthen a barrier between them. Now she had told his own people who had a right to know, and what became of him need concern her no longer.

Lady Ruskin broke into the difficult tears of an old woman.

"Oh, my poor boy!—oh, my poor Andrew! I don't believe it—it can't be true!"

But that she did believe it was obvious. Great as the shock was, it had not come to her as to one utterly unprepared. She had known of Lady Drumesk's fears, she had heard rumours and whisperings about that first strange illness of his.

Christina would have liked to say some words of comfort had she not been afraid of being unwelcome. Lady

Ruskin was sorry for him, and for that she felt grateful, and she had a right to be sorry and to show her sorrow.

Christina's eyes were quite dry; tears were for such things as partings and death—too slight for such an awful living martyrdom as this.

After all, it was upon her that the responsibility of making suggestions fell.

Lady Ruskin was helpless.

"What can I do? If it is true, what can I do? At this time in the evening too! And how can I interfere? If I tell Ruskin, I don't know what will happen."

"I think," said Christina, "if you were to tell the colonel."

She wished she had consulted McLeod himself long ago as to what should be done. She had no confidence in her own judgment or Lady Ruskin's."

"Or the doctor," she suggested after a moment's consideration.

"But what can they do? What can anybody do? Oh, my poor Andrew!"

"Nobody can do anything," said Christina, quietly, "at present. But they could have him—watched."

She was surprised at her own calm words, with never a touch of pity in them for McLeod.

Lady Ruskin did not think at all about Christina. If she felt for McLeod more than a friend had a right to do, it was her own fault, and she deserved to suffer.

And Christina was proudly conscious of it, and went her way without one sign of feeling.

But that night she knelt beside her bed, and prayed with all her heart and all her strength that before morning came McLeod might die.

She would have been willing to bargain with God that the whole happiness of her life should pay for this great boon.

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTINA awoke next morning with a feeling that something dreadful was going to happen.

It was a close, oppressive morning, with a cloudy sky and no breeze—a depressing day in itself.

She got up late and dressed very slowly, trying to spend as much time as possible. She felt illogically certain that something was going to happen.

She wondered what Lady Ruskin had done. The responsibility was off Christina's shoulders. Theoretically, anything that might happen now did not concern her, and practically there was no way for her to find out how things went.

She must simply wait, and she was not naturally patient.

She was afraid to go out. She had no physical fear of McLeod, but morally she was afraid to meet him, with the knowledge of his betrayed confidence, necessary though it had been to betray it, even for his own sake.

She could not help listening with bated breath to every footstep along the passage outside her door, and a knock made her start nervously.

It was hopeless even to pretend to do anything. She rearranged the only box she had brought with her to Morrell's; she copied a chapter or two of her last story, which really did not need to be copied at all; and then she sat down and tried to concentrate her attention on a very stupid novel she had brought from the library the day before.

Nobody came near her. The Wrenches were naturally sociable souls, and, though they might traduce Christina behind her back, would never have allowed her to sit alone in her room, but they had gone on a yachting expedition.

She felt dreadfully alone as the day crawled away. Her head ached, and she felt sick and worried physically and mentally.

She had found the absence of the Wrenches a relief at first, but before they got back from their picnic, at about five, she had begun to long for them.

They were in high spirits; they had had a delightful

sail, and capital fun. Captain Webber had made himself most charming, and he was going to take them to Gozo on Saturday. He must be introduced to Christina, as he was anxious to ask her, too. They had had a luxurious luncheon —champagne, ice pudding. Wasn't Mrs. Stoddart specially fond of ice pudding?

They had had a very ample tea likewise, but the sea air had made them so hungry that they were quite ready to do justice to a second edition. Wouldn't Mrs. Stoddart have another bit of muffin?

At this point in the conversation a waiter made his appearance with an extra jug of cream, and the information that there was "a gentleman."

"For me?" said Lady Francis.

"No, my lady; for Mrs. Stoddart."

"Won't he come in, then?" said Lady Francis, languidly.

"I'll go and see," said Christina.

"Perhaps you'd better," Lady Francis assented, with indifference; "last time 'a gentleman' was announced, it turned out to be a shopboy from Manchester House."

"Probably it's the man about our flat," said Christina.

"I'll have a fresh cup of tea ready for you," said Lady Eva.

Christina refused, with a laughing allusion to Lady Eva's powers of tea-drinking, and went out, dawdling lazily along the passage towards the landing.

McLeod had been in her mind all day, but just at that moment she was not thinking of him. She was wondering if it was her former landlord, whether she would be able to keep a grave face while she listened to his marvellous English; she must not disgrace herself by laughing as she had done last time.

It came upon her quite with the freshness of a shock when McLeod came forward to meet her—McLeod with such a white face and such a strange, excited manner.

There was a little unwonted disorder in his usually scrupulously correct attire: his waistcoat was not fully buttoned and his tie was out of place. Christina noticed these little things in one hasty glance.

He came up to her and caught her arm.

"I have come for you," he said; "there is nobody else here, is there?"

He peered round, not looking freely and frankly as a man ought to look, but with the eyes of a hunted animal.

Christina had one moment of overmastering terror, during which she could have fled and left him; then she turned to him with a steady smile.

"There is nobody else here, Captain McLeod, but there are several people in the drawing room; will you come and have some tea?"

"You don't know what I have come for, then?"

Had he discovered her betrayal, and come to reproach her with it? She felt it would be more than she could bear. But he did not speak angrily, only very sadly and resolutely.

"I suppose you have come for some tea, and to see me."

She wished he would look away from her for one moment.

"I've come—I must whisper it to you——"

Christina stood her ground firmly; she did not shrink when McLeod, with another furtive glance round, came quite close to her and spoke in her ear.

"The time has come for us both to die," he said.

She knew everything now. There were no more doubts or hopes. It remained for her to face the blow as best she might.

McLeod drew back a few steps, looking at her suspiciously to see the effect of his words, and she forced her lips into a fixed smile.

"This is very sudden," she said; "but I daresay you are right. Only, I should like to understand your reasons."

Surely somebody would pass by; there were so often people coming and going in this landing.

He answered her at once and very earnestly.

"I have plenty of reasons. I am only thinking of what is best for you. You see, I must die—there's no doubt about that; and you are married to a husband you hate, and there's no other chance of happiness for you. I have thought it all out. Come, there's no time to waste."

"It's quite early still," said Christina.

"I want to give you your choice. See, what I have here."

He took a long Japanese knife from his pocket, handling it tenderly and drawing his finger up and down the sharp blade.

"I have hidden this for days," he said, in a confidential whisper, "to have it ready. When you were at St. Angelo the other night I thought the time had come, but you called me to look at photographs, and then I remembered that Grant must come first, and thought it better to wait. Can't you feel the pleasure of drawing this along your throat? It is perfectly bright and sharp and clean."

Christina felt an odd difficulty in concentrating her thoughts and words. "I see what you mean. But you wouldn't do that here—in the hotel? It would not be fair. You see, the carpet——"

Her eyes followed the gleaming knife blade with a fascination that made her forget what she was going to say.

"I thought of that. That was what made me decide to ask you if you would prefer drowning? I don't mind at all, and I want to do as you wish." But for the excitement in McLeod's manner, he might have been making the most ordinary proposition in the world, and politely waiting for Christina's decision.

"That will be much better," she said at once.

"Are you ready, then? I have chosen the place and my cart is at the door to take us there."

Christina began to feel as if she was playing a part in a ghastly kind of comedy; it was impossible that this could be really happening—that this horrible fate could be held out to her in a hotel full of people.

"I can't possibly go without my hat," she said. She was thinking busily the whole time, so busily that her head began to get confused.

McLeod looked at her suspiciously.

"I am not going to let you go alone," he said; "you don't understand what is the best thing for you, and I do. If you attempt to speak to anybody, I will kill you at once."

"I don't want to speak to anybody," said Christina, steadily. "I am quite ready to do as you wish. But I

should not like to suffer pain. Will you let me feel if that knife is sharp?"

He gave a cunning laugh.

"No, no," he said, "I am not so simple as that! But if you don't like this, I will put it away. I have a pistol here, and, by God! if you betray us—— Don't you see that there is no other way? If there was, I wouldn't take this. Everybody has turned against us, and you can't live in a world where people all hate you and turn you into ridicule. We must be quick, quick, or they will be here!"

The hunted look came back into his eyes as he glanced furtively over his shoulder.

He walked to Christina's room with her and made her leave the door open, planting himself as a sentinel in the doorway.

She had thought of the bell, but to ring it meant in all probability instant death. She revolved plan after plan in her mind as she tried delay over her hat at the glass. They must drive down Strada Reale, and surely they would see some one to whom she could appeal, even if they left the hotel without meeting any one.

In the shadow of the wardrobe she managed to scribble a hasty line with a pencil she had in her pocket and a piece of newspaper: "Captain McLeod is mad! For God's sake, help!" There was no time for more. McLeod was already very impatient.

"I am ready," said Christina. "But the Wrenches—won't they think it rude if I don't go in for a moment to say good-by?"

"It won't matter to us what they think," said McLeod. "There is no time to lose."

They had to pass the door of the Wrenches' sitting room on their way to the stairs, and Christina lingered as much as she could, only too conscious that he watched her every movement. As they passed, the door suddenly opened, and Lady Eva came out, swinging her hat in her hand and humming cheerfully to herself.

"Hullo! Captain McLeod," she said, "you'd better come in and have some tea; Mrs. Stoddart, you never came back for your last cup. Frank has just gone down to the club. Didn't you meet him?"

Christina saw McLeod's hand go to his pocket. He answered Lady Eva with his eyes fixed steadily on Christina.

"Thank you," he said; "there's not time to go in. I am going to take Mrs. Stoddart for a drive."

"It's rather late, isn't it?" said Lady Eva, with some surprise. "Are you going to dine with us to-night, Mrs. Stoddart? I am sure Ethel will be delighted if Captain McLeod will come, too."

"I am afraid I can't," said McLeod. "As you say, it is late, and I don't think we ought to delay any longer."

Christina had made no attempt to speak. If Lord Francis had been there, she might have been driven to some desperate effort, but what help would she find in two other women against an armed madman?

If McLeod had gone on in front and let her follow him, she would have had the chance of dropping the note she had scrawled; but he drew back politely and made her precede him, without ever taking his hand from his pocket.

She went mechanically down the stairs. She was beginning to give up hope of escape, and to grow half inclined to yield to his imperious will; but still she felt in some odd way as if all this did not concern her, as if it were a kind of exciting puzzle to which she was bound in honour to find a solution.

But with the open air she regained hopefulness. She would do her best to save her life.

McLeod's new dogcart, with Nur-el-din between the shafts, was waiting at the door, and a small native boy was standing at the horse's head.

There was no help to be got from him. Christina went round to stroke Nur-el-din's soft nose, but McLeod called to her impatiently.

She allowed herself to be helped into the cart, with her twisted note held firmly crushed in her left hand. Strada Reale was her only hope; she was on the wrong side for the club, but surely they would meet somebody. She made a faint request to be allowed to drive, but McLeod refused abruptly.

Then the boy let Nur-el-din's head go, McLeod gathered up the reins, and they started on their strange drive.

Where were they going to, and what would be the end

of it? she wondered, as she glanced quickly from side to side in the gathering dusk.

McLeod bent over her. "We have escaped them all!" he said, in a voice of exultation; "you must trust to me now. You know I would not hurt a hair of your head if it could be helped, but if you move I shall shoot you. But you are brave, aren't you? You know it is the only thing for us?"

They had turned into the Strada Reale.

"You know that I agree with you entirely," said Christina; "but I don't want to be shot, and you have allowed me to choose. Where shall we go? Why not choose the Waves Point?" she suggested, with a sudden remembrance of the sentinel they must pass to reach it.

As she spoke she looked at him. He was a little untidy and dishevelled, and his manner was strange, but it was not a difference that would be noticeable to passers-by; it was useless to hope for that.

There were a couple of soldiers walking along the open square by St. John's. Should she throw the note now on the chance of their seeing it? If she did, would it not be trodden under foot by passing Maltese before they reached it, and if not, would they be *prompt* enough?

She caught sight of Campbell and another man buying flowers at one of the little green stands. If they would *only* look round! But they never turned.

With her eyes fixed upon them, Christina missed the general and his wife till it was too late.

There were at least half a dozen officers on the club steps. This would have been her chance, had not McLeod, with his hand on his pistol, been between her and them.

Two or three of them raised their caps—one threw them a laughing salutation. If they only knew!

"Let us stop for half a second. I have a message for Mr. Browning," she ventured to say.

McLeod turned upon her fiercely. "Are you mad?" he said. He sent Nur-el-din on at a quick trot. The game little horse needed no whip, or there might have been a chance.

Even if she had been allowed to speak to Mr. Browning, how could she have explained quickly enough, so that he

should understand what she was talking about before McLeod did? She hesitated about dropping her note into the road behind the dogcart till it was too late.

It was her only chance, and if she wasted it, there was little hope left.

There were two or three men coming down the opera house steps—probably they had just taken their stalls for the evening's performance. Christina had been going with the Wrenches.

Should she throw the note? There was no time to reflect, and it seemed her last chance. With a good aim the bit of paper ought to reach the ground quite close to the feet of the approaching men. Almost she had waited too long. With a sudden impulse, she flung the note behind her with all her strength. It was necessarily a left-handed throw, and consequently uncertain. It might have failed altogether to reach the footway, and be by this time ground into the dust under horses' feet.

She could not look behind to see, for McLeod was watching her suspiciously.

"What did you do?" he said.

Christina gave a sigh, which was almost of relief. She could do no more now. She must simply sit and wait for what might happen.

She wished she had finished that last story of hers. She wondered who would undertake to write to George, and to her father. Surely somebody would write to her father, and not leave him to see it for the first time in the paper. "Drowning accident at Malta. A very sad accident."—Would they call it an accident? How would they explain it? The Wrenches would have something to talk about for at least a week. Would they think that she, too, had sought death willingly?

They were outside the gates now, and Nur-el-din quickened his pace.

They met a festive returning picnic party, and had to slacken a little and thread their way through the dogcarts and riders.

Christina hesitated to make one cry for help, but McLeod was watching her closely.

The McFerrans were in the last dogcart. Christina

wished somebody would tell Mrs. McFerran how unbecoming large hats were to her. She really had no idea about dressing; of course they were poor, but that was the very reason she ought to avoid startling colours.

Then she was shocked at herself for allowing her mind to be distracted by such inappropriate thoughts.

They turned into the Sliema road. George's two ideas for Sunday walks had been the Sliema road and the golf course, and last Sunday they had walked right round to Sliema in the cool of the evening, and come back by the ferryboat, and all the way Christina had been thinking of the wonderful, delightful week of freedom that was before her.

McLeod turned to her with a kind of excited tenderness in his manner.

"You are not afraid?" he said. "Don't you see you *couldn't* go on living with your husband, and—there's no other way. It won't be hard to die, and I shall hold you closely—*darling.*"

It was the only lover's word that Christina was ever to hear from his lips.

Behind them came a sudden rattle of wheels.

McLeod looked hastily back.

"We are not safe yet!" he said.

There was a dogcart following them. More, in the dusk, Christina could not make out. It might have nothing to say to them, or it might mean a possible rescue.

"They are after us again!" said McLeod, a little wildly.

They were going down hill, and Nur-el-din broke into a gallop.

There was a shout from the other dogcart.

Christina could not make her voice quite steady as she spoke.

"Don't go so fast," she said; "those people have got nothing to do with us."

"They are hunting us!" cried McLeod, with excitement, "but they shan't catch us alive."

The pace grew furious. Nur-el-din was gamely doing his best, and they tore down the hill, with the dogcart rocking under them and the wind whistling past them.

It was like a very evil dream. McLeod grew wildly excited, and Christina herself began to feel a mad exhilaration in the race, and an irrational feeling of being hunted.

McLeod snatched his pistol.

"It is their own fault—their own fault," he muttered to himself.

Did he mean death to them or to their pursuers?

"You are not going to fire?" said Christina, very quickly.

But McLeod's mind was entirely engrossed with the idea of escape. He leaned back in the dogcart, and before she realized what he was going to do there was a loud report, and he sat up with the smoking pistol in his hand.

There was no sound from the cart behind. Christina wondered if anybody was hurt.

Nur-el-din swerved across the road in such a way as nearly to upset them, and dashed on again.

So far the road had been free, but at the turn of the bay they came upon a blockade of carts and *carrozzes*. McLeod drove on recklessly. If he had wanted to stop now, it would have been useless, for Nur-el-din was beyond control.

McLeod never was still for an instant: he shouted to the carts, to their pursuers, to Christina.

Almost they had shaved through successfully, when they suddenly found themselves directly opposite an advancing *carrozze*. Christina shut her eyes, and did not know what to hope for, and McLeod gave a shout.

Then there was a crash, an outburst of excited cries and exclamations, a confused swaying mass of men and horses, and Christina was thrown violently on to the road, and what happened next concerned her not.

CHAPTER VI.

CHRISTINA opened her eyes in a sort of bedlam. Natives were shrieking and disputing at the top of their voices, to an accompaniment of hearty British curses, terrified horses were kicking and plunging, and the confusion seemed complete.

What had happened? Where was she? In the first painful return to consciousness she did not know.

"My God! isn't there any brandy?" she heard somebody say, quite close to her. "Send one of those shrieking idiots into Valetta—there is no time to be lost."

Christina turned with a sort of relief to the one familiar face in the crowd.

"Mr. McFerran," she said, "what is the matter?"

McFerran really did not know; he was an estimable but by no means brilliant young man, and he was honestly bewildered.

He and his wife had been quietly driving home from a picnic, when their dogcart had been seized in the dusk by a couple of excited middies, who had turned Mrs. McFerran into the street with a hasty and inadequate explanation, and had carried him off, where or for what he was by no means clear.

But he was much relieved to find that Christina, who had been lying white and still for the last five minutes, was not dead.

"There's been an accident," he explained, somewhat unnecessarily.

Christina was beginning to collect her scattered wits.

"Captain McLeod?" she said, with sudden terror.

Why was Mr. McFerran so carefully keeping himself between her and *something?*

"He's only stunned, I hope," said McFerran; "we have sent for the doctor. For goodness' sake, silence that howling beast, one of you fellows!"

But the Maltese *carrozze* driver, shrieking at the top of his voice, with floods of tears pouring down his cheeks, was not to be so easily silenced.

"I'll put you into a *carrozze* and send you home, Mrs.

Stoddart," McFerran said, which was obviously an excellent suggestion.

Christina hesitated. There was a sense of extreme confusion in her head, and she felt sick and bruised and shaken. Clearly she was of no use here, and very much in the way, but she could not go away in uncertainty.

"Might I see Captain McLeod for one minute?" she said. She had a ghastly fear of what McFerran might be trying to keep from her.

But he assented at once.

Then she got up, and to her surprise felt she was shaking all over, shaking so much that she could not stand, and had to cling suddenly to McFerran's arm.

There was nothing terrible about McLeod; he was lying in the middle of the road, where the crowd had been successfully beaten back, and one of the middies, a tall youth of eighteen, was supporting him in a half-sitting position, while he bathed his forehead with water out of a hat.

"Is he—*dead?*" said Christina.

The boy looked up. "Dead? Not a bit of it," he said; "the doctor will bring him round in a shake."

"May I not put you into a *carrozze?*" said McFerran, urgently. "This is no place for you."

Then, as she moved to obey, she was again conscious that he interposed between her and something.

"What is it?" she said; "I don't want to be a trouble, and I am beyond minding anything—you may believe me. What don't you want me to see?"

"Oh, nothing," McFerran said, hastily, with rather a white face; "but the dogcart is in tinder, and—the horse is a bit hurt."

"What!—Nur-el-din?"

"Yes, poor brute. Don't look, Mrs. Stoddart—it is rather sickening."

A *carrozze* horse, with two broken legs, was making wild, convulsive efforts to stand, and a few paces off lay Nur-el-din in a pool of blood, gasping out his life, with a hole in his chest where the shaft of a *carrozze* had caught and literally impaled him.

The sight had made McFerran himself feel very sick and faint for a moment.

"You will find Captain McLeod's pistol somewhere," said Christina, with her head turned away.

"All right," said McFerran.

He put her into a *carrozze*, with one of the middies to look after her, though she protested there was no need for her to trouble anybody. But it was a relief not to have to think at all.

As they turned into Valetta, they heard the distant report of a pistol, and Christina heaved a long sigh of relief in the knowledge that Nur-el-din's sufferings were ended.

Her middy was very capable and kind. He actually helped her up to her bedroom, and settled her on her bed as if he had been a woman, and got her some brandy and sent for a maid.

Christina confusedly felt that she had much to be grateful to him for and tried to thank him, but he cut her short cheerfully.

"I must go back now," he said, "and see if I can be of any use. I hope you will have good news of your husband in an hour or so."

Her husband? What did he mean? Christina lay idly puzzling over it in her mind after he had gone, till the solution suddenly dawned upon her, and she fell into hysterical laughter.

When the tardy chambermaid arrived, she found her patient shaking all over with sobs and convulsive laughter.

Christina had never known what it was to be hysterical in her life before.

She had not the least idea what time of the day or night it was when Lady Eva came in. The maid had helped her to bed, and then she had lain there, sobbing and shuddering, occasionally falling into momentary dozes, from which she started awake, half mad with terror.

Lady Eva came in with a rustle of silk, and Christina realized that she was in full evening dress under her opera cloak.

Her appearance had a good effect in making Christina pull herself together, and make an effort to collect her thoughts.

"You poor thing!" said Lady Eva, sitting down upon the bed, "why ever didn't you send for me? Just think,

I knew nothing at all till a man came to our box and told us, and I don't know how much of his story to believe. Why didn't you send for me?"

"I don't know—I didn't think," said Christina, wearily.

"Good gracious! how hot your hands are! Just fancy my meeting you and Captain McLeod, and noticing nothing wrong! It's a most romantic tale. Was he going to shoot you, like Captain Grant?"

"Captain Grant?" Christina started up in bed.

"Lie down, you silly girl; he didn't kill him. Captain Grant is going about with his arm in a sling, looking most interesting. Did you really throw a note to the middies, and did they pick it up and rush to the rescue? Everybody is talking about it, and nobody seems to know the rights of the case."

"How is Captain McLeod?" said Christina, in a low voice.

She was not listening to Lady Eva's words, but the presence of anybody was a comfort. She had an unreasoning terror of being left alone again.

"They have taken him up to hospital, but they don't seem to know much. How did it all happen? Is it true that he was mad?"

"Oh, I can't talk about it!" said Christina, with a sudden cry of pain.

Lady Eva was on the whole very kind. She settled Christina comfortably in bed, she discovered she had had no dinner, and insisted on making her eat something; she asked her if she had everything she wanted, and restrained her curiosity.

Once or twice Christina opened her lips to ask her not to leave her alone all the long night, but as often she restrained herself from speaking. There was no reason in the world why Lady Eva should put herself to so much trouble for an acquaintance.

Christina never liked to think of that night when it was over. She was completely unnerved. Sometimes she fancied she saw the door gradually open, and McLeod appear, with his long, bright knife in his hand; sometimes she thought that a murderer lurked behind the drapery of the dressing table, or in the shadow of the tall wardrobe.

Again, between sleep and wakefulness, she and McLeod were tearing along the Sliema road, hunted by many dog-carts, or they were drowning, while she struggled to escape, and he held her ever more and more tightly, and forced her under the choking water.

She tried to make her mind a blank, she tried to draw her thoughts to other things, but always in vain. She lay on her back and rolled herself up tightly in the bedclothes, that at least she need not fear that any one should come behind her, or that she should see the face of a madman over her shoulder.

It was a long, endless night.

With the morning sleep came to her. She awoke late, and spent an odd, dishevelled sort of day. With her belated breakfast notice of her ship came to her from the P. & O. office, and she was startled to realize that this was Friday, and that her hoped-for week was almost over.

The Wrenches were very kind and very much interested. They were anxious for all particulars, a great many more particulars than Christina saw fit to give, and through the day they came at intervals with varying stories of McLeod's chances of life, and odd bits of information as to what people had said. McLeod, as a racing man, and as being well to the fore at garrison concerts and regimental entertainments of all kinds, was about the most universally known person in Malta, and everybody was talking about him.

The regiment was not communicative, and was not much in evidence.

Lady Eva had captured Captain Grant in Strada Reale, but had failed to make much of him. Possibly he had no objection to be seen with his arm in a sling, but he did not parade his misfortune, and what he said of McLeod was very heartily and warmly spoken.

Perhaps it was as well for Christina that the Wrenches had no delicacies or reserves in telling her all that gossip said, and that they did not allow her to fancy that the subject could not be discussed freely before her.

Gerty Ruskin-Boyd came in in the afternoon, burning with excitement.

Didn't Chrissy feel herself a heroine? How terrible it

must have been! What had Andrew said and done? Wasn't it strange that Mr. Browning had seen them pass the club and had guessed nothing?

Gerty's conversation was sprinkled with Mr. Browning's name, as it had once been with Captain Grant's.

What did Chrissy think would have happened if the middies had not found her note, or had not been quick enough?

This was a question which even the Wrenches had hesitated about putting to Christina, though they had discussed it with each other and with everybody they met. It was quite unanswerable, and Christina said so impatiently.

Lady Ruskin did not come; Gerty said she was too much shocked and upset, but she felt sure if Chrissy would go over she would be glad to see her. But Christina felt by no means so sure of this, and declined on the grounds of her immediate departure.

She flatly refused to go to Gozo next day in Captain Webber's yacht, though Lady Eva was most anxious that she should.

"There is no good staying at home and worrying and fretting yourself into a fever," she said; "it is much better to try and amuse yourself and forget all bothers. And, besides, you *ought* to go. What is Hecuba to you or you to Hecuba? People are talking quite enough as it is."

"I shan't have time to worry or fret, for there will be a good deal to do, the last day," said Christina; "and as for making people talk, I don't think my going to Gozo would stop that."

"I don't know what you can possibly have to do!" said Lady Eva.

But Christina was quite firm.

She was glad when she was left alone in the evening to establish herself comfortably in a big armchair with a book on her knee, and think.

In a day or two she and McLeod would vanish out of the lives of all these people, who were just at present so much interested in them.

Next winter their places would be filled up, and nobody would miss them. And to each other, whether McLeod lived or died, they would be absolutely lost.

He had made to her all the pleasure of her Malta winter, and now he would make all the pain in recalling it.

He had called her "darling." He had given her an insight into all that she had lost out of her life.

She could never go back to George now—never—never. That at least seemed to be decided. If the best of life was shut out from her by a child's mistake, she need not choose the worst.

She might shake herself free, and find happiness of another kind in her writing. The cruelty to George seemed less great now that he was so far away and so entirely in the background.

Next morning, in pursuit of this new idea, and in the security of the Wrenches' absence, she faced life again.

She got out her story and forced herself to finish it, and to crush back intrusive thoughts.

In the middle, Dr. Adams came to see her. It was a professional sort of visit, for which he apologized. He wanted Mrs. Stoddart to tell him everything she could about the preliminaries of McLeod's attack. Dr. Adams—he did not allow himself to be called Dr. Adams, being a surgeon-captain or something of that description—was a chatty little man, not absolutely a gentleman, and for that reason perhaps in some ways easier to talk to just then.

There was a great deal of honest pity in his voice when he spoke of McLeod, and told her that to all appearance there was no further danger from his accident.

"I daresay I ought to say I am glad," said Christina, "but I can't. I would a thousand times rather, for his sake, that you had come here to tell me that he was dead."

"Come, now, you mustn't say that, Mrs. Stoddart," Dr. Adams remonstrated. "McLeod seems to be quite himself again. But it is an odd thing that he doesn't seem the least surprised to find himself in hospital. He asks no questions, not even when he doesn't get a knife at dinner-time, and, though he did say something about shaving this morning, he was quite easily put off with some absurd excuse."

Tears sprang into Christina's eyes. "He *knows*," she said, softly.

Dr. Adams had nothing to say. He, too, thought that McLeod knew.

"What will be done with him?" said Christina, after a long pause.

"He is to be sent to England by the next trooper. The Serapis is due some day next week."

"And then?"

Dr. Adams answered with some hesitation.

"Of course then it depends. We can only hope for the best."

"But is there any chance? Not I mean of the army, but of his being able to live—like other people?"

"If you want the truth, Mrs. Stoddart, I am afraid it is all up with him. You see, people are beginning to talk now of Beresford's death; and though that may not be pressed, still I am afraid it will be a case of getting worse. By Jove! it does seem a cruel thing that the wheels shaved his head the other day!"

There was a long silence. Christina was picturing to herself the colourless, futile life that lay before McLeod, and wondering how he would bear it.

"You would be astonished at the way the regiment take it. I went to Baviar to see about some things McLeod wanted, and, by Jove! they talked of nothing else. The seniors were capping stories about all he had done in Egypt and India, and the others were following it up with exploits on the moors at home, or recollections of the races he'd won. And as for the men—why, I think I was asked how he was fifty times if I was asked once, as I crossed the barrack square."

"He was very popular, I think," said Christina; and then, with a stab of pain, she realized that she had used the past tense, and that they were both speaking as of a dead man.

"There was a report that he was dead yesterday, you know," said Dr. Adams, "and I'll tell you a true story about that. Seton-Kerr—of course you know he was McLeod's subaltern—says he was stopped by half a dozen men, regular bigoted Scotch Presbyterians, with a sum of money—I forget how much—which they wanted him to spend in masses for their captain. Just think of that! And I

have no doubt they believed they were perjuring their eternal salvation by pandering to 'papishes.'"

"I am glad they did that. I should like to shake hands with those men," said Christina, with flushing cheeks.

When Dr. Adams rose to say good-by, she made a request which had been in her mind for some time.

Might she go and see McLeod? Would he care to see her? She was going home on Sunday—to-morrow—but if this afternoon would do?

"It might be a good plan," said Dr. Adams, reflectively; "he might tell you more than he would tell me. But it will be awfully painful."

"It will be less painful," said Christina, "than going home with my last remembrance of him what it is."

CHAPTER VII.

"His room is at the end of this passage. Do you feel at all nervous about seeing him alone?"

Dr. Adams had asked the last question because of the sudden rush of colour that flushed into Christina's usually colourless face.

She shook her head.

"Because I can send in one of the orderlies with you, or go in myself if you preferred it?" Dr. Adams was by no means devoid of curiosity, and would have made a third at the interview with great pleasure.

"I would much rather not," said Christina, emphatically.

Dr. Adams, with his cheerful, unceasing ripple of small talk, would have been a maddening third; she would rather have turned back and gone straight to the hotel without seeing McLeod than have agreed to see him under such guardianship.

"Well, there's no danger. He is perfectly quiet, and to all appearance sensible. I told him you were coming, and he took it as stolidly as he takes everything else. He may

say more to you alone. You'll let me know if he gives you reason to think he is nursing any ideas of suicide? They generally do."

Dr. Adams paused for these last words at the door of McLeod's room, and spoke in a whisper. Christina felt a mad impulse to laugh. It was like being introduced with all due precaution into the cage of a wild animal.

"I will leave the door a little open, and there will be a man within hearing of the smallest sound; in case you feel nervous, I will tell him to look into the room now and then. But you may be quite sure if there was the smallest danger I wouldn't allow you to see him."

Christina made an impatient movement towards the door. Dr. Adams didn't know what he was talking about. Was this a time to consider herself and her feelings? She was feeling for McLeod—realizing what a meeting in such wise would be for a proud, self-reliant man.

The doctor was still volubly encouraging her as he opened the door.

"Here's a visitor for you, McLeod," he said, with an overdone joviality, which was meant to ignore anything unusual or painful.

McLeod was sitting by the window, doing nothing, not even looking out. He had always been a man who liked to spend the most part of his time in active employment, and who, when he did nothing, enjoyed doing nothing with all his heart, in a comfortable armchair with a pipe.

But now he had not even chosen the most comfortable chair in the room, and he was not smoking.

He rose without elasticity, but still with a certain lack of his usual deliberation, and came to meet Christina.

"It is very kind of you to come," he said.

The hurry and excitement of the last few days had gone out of his voice, and given place to his old slow speech. There was a certain new stoop of his broad shoulders, as if the helplessness of a strong man was finding physical expression. But his eyes as they met hers were the eyes of a sane man.

"It's a good pull up these stairs, isn't it?" he said, and Christina vaguely assented. Dr. Adams's presence acted upon her as a complete restraint.

McLeod drew up a chair to the window for her, and glanced expectantly at Dr. Adams, doubtful whether he intended to remain or not.

The doctor took the hint, not much enlightened as to the terms upon which they stood.

McLeod, after an imperceptible pause, asked her about her stories.

Christina wondered how much he knew and remembered. Did he wish her to ignore all that had happened, and talk to him as if this were an ordinary meeting? It would be very unlike McLeod if he was trying to show her that in coming to see him she had taken a false step.

She tried to follow his lead, and found herself answering vaguely and at random.

Every now and then a short silence fell between them.

It was always her fault; McLeod talked quietly and naturally. He talked, fighting at every word with a selfish temptation which threatened to become too strong for him; if he gave in, he told himself he should be a brute, and if he did not keep himself well in hand, he would give in.

Christina was only thinking of how utterly their last meeting was being wasted. She could not go, she *could* not, without at least telling him how she felt for him.

She interrupted him recklessly in the middle of a wise sentence anent publishers.

"I can't sit here and talk to you as if we had just been introduced at a dance! It is all so terrible—so heart-breaking."

The forced endurance in McLeod's expression was shaken a very little.

"There is not much good talking about it," he said, "and you have had quite enough bother with my concerns. I don't think much of a man who howls when he is hurt, especially when he knew he was going to be hurt."

"But it is the *not* speaking that I can't bear," Christina went on, heedlessly. "Is there *nothing* I can do? Is there nothing, however small, that might be an—alleviation?" She had checked herself on the point of using the word "comfort."

"Don't tempt me!" said McLeod, with a sudden sternness in his voice.

He got up from his chair, moving impatiently into a position where she could not see his face.

Just then the orderly looked in. He only gave a watchful glance round the room and at once withdrew, but the sound of the door made both McLeod and Christina look round, and by a mutual impulse their eyes met.

"Are you sorry for me?" said McLeod.

Christina said nothing; she looked at him with eyes misty with tears that hurt.

He broke a short silence, speaking with his ordinary, half-drawled deliberation.

"Will you," he began, hesitating a little—"would it worry you to tell me all about it? I remember, but I can't feel sure."

He had not given in and acknowledged himself as a coward yet.

Christina told him something, an outline of what had happened, softening it in the telling as well as she could, and hesitating somewhat over the story of their drive. How much did he remember?

Did he remember how he had spoken to her?

He at least showed no inclination to repeat himself. He listened gravely to all she told him, occasionally interposing with a brief question if she paused. She had dreaded an inquiry about Nur-el-din, but his very silence about him led her to think that he must remember something.

When she had finished he drew a long breath.

"Well," he said, "now that the end has come, all that is left is to be thankful that it is no worse—for other people."

"The end?" Christina repeated, in a low voice.

McLeod had meant to be utterly reticent with her as he had been with others, but the complete sympathy and understanding in her voice unnerved him. Unexpectedly to himself as well as to Christina, his fierce reserve broke down.

He turned upon her with sudden vehemence.

"The end? No, God knows it is not the end! I may

live *years*—do you understand—*years*. Shut up like a rat in a cage—a sane man among madmen! I am sane now—am I not?" he ended, with a sudden anxiety.

"Yes, yes."

"But I can never be sure of myself—I can never be a free man again. My God, I can't bear it!—it is more than any man should have to bear."

He spoke in a suppressed voice, controlling his tone more by instinct than with any clear remembrance of the man outside.

"If there was any mercy in this world or the next, when we were upset on the Sliema road, I should have been thrown with my head against a stone, and killed!"

"I wish you had been!" Christina said, with her whole heart in her words. "I prayed that you might die."

"You did?" said McLeod, with energy. "You understand that I have fought till the last—as you said? I confess to you that I am a coward. I haven't pluck to face the rest of my—existence."

There were no words of comfort to say to him. Christina rose and went over to where he stood by the window, and she touched his hand lightly with hers. Not all McLeod's strength had ever moved her towards him as his weakness moved her. Everything else in the world seemed blotted out by his suffering, and of small account. She would willingly, even gladly, have taken his burden upon her to let him go free.

It was pity, exalted to a passion, and perhaps it was something more. It may be that at that moment she reached the highest willingness of self-sacrifice in her life. But she had not raised McLeod with her.

There had been a struggle— a temptation with which he had been fighting his hardest, but with the passion of sympathy in her eyes it proved too strong for him.

"Will you help me?" he said.

There was no mistaking the joy of readiness which flashed into her face.

"You *know*," she said, softly.

"I am a selfish brute," said McLeod, heavily.

They were standing close together, but drew apart

almost by instinct, as for the third time the orderly glanced in.

The sight of him decided McLeod.

"It is not an easy thing that I am going to ask you," he said.

Christina made no protestations, and she was trembling a little, but he saw that she drew herself up resolutely. She felt that what he was going to ask would not be easy.

"You said once that if the time came when there was no hope, you would not blame me if I ended everything," McLeod began.

Christina bowed her head.

"You have told me you prayed that I might die. Will you help me?"

She did not exclaim or even change colour. She walked to a chair and sat down, finding for a moment a difficulty in drawing her breath.

He went on, speaking hurriedly and low.

"I only ask you for the means—the power. If there was one soul in the world to whom my dragging out my life would bring benefit or pleasure, I hope I should be man enough to try. If it is a sin—if the God who made me and then cursed me will not forgive me for such a sin—I know this, that I would rather live in hell than with such a fiend!"

His voice ceased, and there was a long silence. He had said all that there was to say, and more words were useless. He waited for Christina's decision.

Once or twice she tried to speak, but she was breathless and dry-lipped, and when the words came at last the voice did not sound like her own.

"What shall I do?"

McLeod had been standing with his face half turned away; now he faced her and moved to her side, stopping to raise her hand quietly and touch it lightly with his lips. Such a demonstration of feeling from him was equivalent to much more from another man.

He did not put his thanks into words.

Then he sat down, and explained what he wanted her to do in a few commonplace sentences. They both said little and were strictly practical in their words, and when

he had explained, and Christina without protest had accepted the task he gave her, neither of them felt that there was anything more to be said.

She rose, and they stood silently face to face.

It was their last meeting in this world, as they both well knew.

Christina looked long in McLeod's face. She wanted to remember it.

To him, who had parted with everything in life except the mere living, it was perhaps less hard.

"Good-by," said Christina.

He would have liked to ask her about her future—about her husband and what her life was to be—but the thought of the thing she had promised to do for him stopped him. As the one selfish act of an unselfish man it seemed to blot out everything, and condemn as mockery any interest he might show in her life.

"Good-by," he said, and restrained the instinct to add "God bless you."

Then Christina turned away and left him.

In her blind haste along the passage she almost ran against Sergeant Malcolm, who had been waiting for nearly an hour to try and get a new opinion, in which there might be hope, about his captain.

Malcolm was white and shaky, and he had one empty sleeve, but the worst part of his troubles was over, and he was to go home in the next trooper.

He had half raised his left hand for a respectful salute when the unseeing despair in Christina's eyes checked him. She was not looking at him or thinking of him—only hurrying blindly on to leave this dreadful place behind her. Malcolm drew back, with his unasked question only too thoroughly answered.

Just outside the hospital gates, Christina met Campbell riding slowly along, and he pulled up at once and jumped down to speak to her.

"Have you been to see poor McLeod?" he said.

Christina had not noticed him until he spoke, and she started and tried to collect her scattered wits. He was the very man to be of use to her now. There was obviously no struggling against fate or chance or whatever it might

be that was leaving her no excuse for failing in her promise.

As she said nothing, Campbell went on, his usually cheerful voice very sober.

"I am going to the hospital to-morrow morning, and taking Jinks with me. The poor little brute is starving and fretting himself to death."

Christina was conscious of a regret that she had not made more of Jinks.

"The other two dogs are quite happy, selfish beasts! They are living on the fat of the land, for the men are one keener than another to look after them."

Christina turned upon him suddenly and undeservedly.

"Why should the dogs be abused?" she said; "none of the men who knew him think it necessary to starve or fret."

Campbell stared at her, and his amazed face brought her back to realities.

"I beg your pardon. Heroics are more than ridiculous."

"You needn't imagine," said Campbell, in a hurt tone, "that any of our fellows don't care. I don't see that you have any right to consider me a heartless brute because I take out my pony instead of letting him stand in the stable. If there was any mortal thing to do for McLeod, I'd do it —any of us would; but men must live."

But would Campbell—would any of them—do what she had promised to do?

Campbell was at all times a peppery young man, and now he was direly offended, and Christina would have found it hard to make her peace, even had she thought it worth while to try. But she remembered the part she had to play, and checked him as he was about to ride away with a stiff salutation.

If he was going to see McLeod to-morrow would he be so good as to take him a parcel from her—a book. Christina was unnecessarily explanatory, but, knowing what she had in her mind, it seemed to her that Campbell might easily be suspicious.

He assented, of course, but rather coldly.

"D—n it all! what did she mean by speaking like

that?" he meditated, as he rode away. "Is it possible that Grant has been making himself objectionable?—and I thought he was behaving so decently."

But Christina had meant nothing. She had only spoken out of the bitterness of her heart.

A little farther on she met half a dozen 79th men in their white jackets and trews, and she hurried past them with a ridiculous instinct that if they looked at her they must guess what she had promised to do.

Just outside the Porte Reale she was passed by a *carrozze* full of officers, and a couple of them, who were Camerons, she knew. They had been to the Marsa, probably playing polo—why not? Life must go on as usual, even in McLeod's own regiment.

She imagined they looked at her curiously as they raised their straw hats. She could have shrieked out her secret. Was it possible that with such a thing in her heart there was no outward change?

CHAPTER VIII.

Christina stood on the deck of a P. and O. steamer, and watched Malta gradually fading into the distance.

She had not loved the place, and with all her strength she hoped she would never see it again; but, as it grew more and more indistinct, it seemed as if it were a piece of her life left behind.

She could not see Valetta now, or distinguish one point of the island from another; later there was nothing left but a dark blur on the blue water, and soon that, too, was hidden from sight.

Christina leaned over the side, looking out long after there was nothing to be seen.

What had she done? Something that could never be undone in this world.

It was too late for regret now. Between her and Malta lay miles of sea.

Would the ship put back even to save a man's life? she wondered, vaguely interested in her speculations as to what the captain would do if she were to tell him.

By this time perhaps it was all over. Even now, McLeod, it might be, was a dead man. Dead? It was almost a mere word to her. She could not realize the possibility of death for him of all men.

She had kept her promise to him, at what a cost she hardly knew yet. And until now she had had no doubt that to him she had acted mercifully.

But now, as she stood by herself, unheedingly apart from the various groups who walked the deck, and sat about in the afternoon sunshine, the first doubts began to assail her.

Had she done the best thing for him? Had she done well in helping him to take his fate into his own hands.

Might he not perhaps have recovered?

How was it she had felt so sure—so very sure—until now?

It was worse, far worse, than useless to let these thoughts come when it was too late.

Christina looked round desperately, but there was no help for her from outside. Nobody was paying any attention to her; why should they? Even the half dozen passengers who had gone on board with her at Malta were strangers to her.

She tried to think of something else. She had her own plans to make. At least George would not want a *murderess* to live with him as his wife. She had always heard morphia was a very painless death—not cruel, like strychnine. She had seen a dog die of strychnine once—her own old dog, who had grown too old and blind to live. How angry she had been at the cruelty of such a death. Morphia would have been better; but nobody gave dogs morphia—of course not.

She had her own money. She could go to London, and live there by herself and write. She would never, never see any one she had known before.

How the ship rocked and her head ached, and how giddy she felt!

The group of Malta people—several officers and their

wives—was in a sheltered corner, fairly close to where she stood, and, with an instinct of desire for human companionship, she made her way to a chair close beside them.

They all looked very happy and comfortable, and they were rejoicing over having left Malta behind them, and talking of what they were going to do when they got home.

Chistina did not listen to them till all at once she caught McLeod's name.

"It is the saddest thing I have heard for a long time," said one man, an old artillery colonel. "Such a steady man, and such a good soldier!"

"I have dined with him often enough both at the club and at mess," said a younger man. "He got on awfully well with all the fellows in the regiment, except perhaps that handsome chap, Grant. I have an idea they had some row or another, but, however that may be, Grant was awfully cut up about it."

"I never knew but one of the regiment," said another man—"a chap called Campbell. Not a bad sort at all, but he lifts his little finger a bit, you know."

"Well, there'll be a step going. It's a great regiment for promotion. I believe one of the captains shot himself just before they came out here."

Christina had no hesitation about listening. She had not thought about it at all, but, indeed, the speakers in no wise considered their conversation private.

The old artillery colonel spoke next.

"I wouldn't be too sure about the step," he said. "McLeod may recover."

"There's no chance of that, surely?" said one lady.

The old colonel shook his head wisely. He knew nothing about it, but he liked always to have a theory of his own.

"I don't know about that. You see, he hasn't muddled his brain with drinking. On the whole, I don't see why he shouldn't have an excellent chance of recovery—an excellent chance."

Christina suddenly sprang up, and faced him with flashing eyes.

"You *didn't* say that? I must have heard you wrong! You didn't mean that it was possible—tell me you didn't!"

The whole party were immensely startled, and the colonel was absolutely scared.

He would have said anything this alarming person desired, but it was not unnatural that he entirely mistook her desires.

"My dear madam, I see no reason why we should not hope. Really——"

Christina suddenly swayed forward, and fainted quietly away at his feet.

CHAPTER IX.

Christina carried out none of her half-formed plans. They were all upset by a piece of information which the ship doctor gave her just before they reached Gibraltar—a piece of information which came to her as the most extraordinary, unexpected thing in the world.

She had been very ill for the first few days, too physically sick and miserable even for thought, and one morning, when she was feeling very weak and faint, she had turned to the doctor and asked him if she was going to die, and he had laughed a little and said he hoped there was no danger of that, and then he had told her his wonderful news. She was going to have a baby!

Perhaps it was not so very extraordinary or unprecedented, after all, but to Christina it came like a thunderclap.

She repelled the idea at first with feverish excitement, but it did her good all the same. It awakened her from the blank despair which was settling down upon her, and disputed possession of her mind with thoughts of McLeod.

She believed it made her still more unhappy, but it at least gave her something to think of and wonder about.

George did not come to meet the ship in London. He could not have got leave in time, and, in any case he

would have looked upon such a journey as a useless expense.

But he was on the station at Manchester, waiting for her with a radiant face, and half an inch of bristle on his chin, denoting the first steps of a new beard.

"Dearest old child, how glad I am to see you! I assure you I have been counting the days. Is your luggage all right? Had you a pleasant voyage? Are you pleased to see me again, little woman?"

What would he have said if she had told him how very narrowly he had escaped never seeing her again?

He was as fussy and as good-naturedly self-important as ever. He kissed Christina with flattering energy, and then hurried her off to a cab, and bustled away to look after her luggage.

He wasn't changed in the least—it was perhaps hardly to be expected that he should be in a fortnight—while she felt herself quite another person.

In the cab he had much to say.

"The mother is looking out for you anxiously, and Kate wanted to come to the station, but I thought I would rather have you all to myself. You don't look a bit hearty, old child; travelling doesn't suit you. Give me another kiss, and say you are glad to see me."

Christina said it, not very unwillingly. She was looking at George in a new light, and she found herself giving him curious, not unfriendly glances every time they passed a lamp-post. His importance to her had so immensely increased.

The other half of her mind was full of a dread that he would speak of McLeod—that he would tell her what by this time must be in the papers. Then she must pretend astonishment, and ask questions, and marvel with George how McLeod had got the poison, lest people should suspect. She must talk of McLeod as if he were nothing to her.

She had no time, in struggling with these separate trains of thought and trying to talk to George brightly and cheerfully, to give way to misgivings about his people till they had absolutely come to the end of their drive. Besides, what did anything matter now? What would it have mattered had they been Choctaw Indians in paint and feathers?

Nevertheless when the cab stopped, she had a moment of dismay.

She had carefully and wisely timed her arrival for the evening, and it was now nearly eight o'clock and quite dark. She could see nothing when they stopped, except that the house was small and just on the street, with iron railings and steps.

"Here we are, old child, at home," said George. He helped her out tenderly and proudly. She looked very pretty now that a little unusual colour had come into her pale cheeks.

"By Jove! won't they be excited when they hear the bell!" said George, proceeding to ring it vigorously.

In another moment they were in the hall, and he was calling loudly for "Kate" and "Maggie."

At first, coming in from the darkness, Christina was aware of little except the sound of two loud and friendly voices with strong accents. When her eyes got more accustomed to the light, she was able to distinguish them, and see that they were both tall, big girls, one plain and the other rather pretty, both with exaggerated buns of hair and large fringes.

"Here she is! Kitty, this is Kate and this is Maggie. Take her in to the mother, girls. Is she in the drawing room?"

"George is always in such a hurry," said the pretty one, rather affectedly; "we haven't half welcomed Kitty yet."

Christina started at the use of her Christian name, but then she remembered it was natural.

They meant to be very kind.

They hurried her in to their mother, all three eagerly, and George with an obvious pride in everybody which was not unpleasing.

Mrs. Stoddart greeted her affectionately.

"You are heartily welcome, my dear. I am indeed glad to see you," she said. Then she drew the girl to her and kissed her warmly.

She was a little old woman—quite a pretty little old woman—with white hair brushed tidily away under a substantial and unpretentious cap, and a black cashmere dress, with a white shawl over her shoulders. Christina liked her

appearance much better than that of her daughters, who wore red dresses trimmed with glaringly cheap satin and with rather dirty frilling at the neck, fastened with brooches obviously gilt.

"You must be perished," said Mrs. Stoddart; "draw the armchair to the fire, George. You must know that these children of mine are too fond of coddling their old mother, and they wouldn't let me go out into the hall to meet you because I have a touch of bronchitis."

"I am so glad you didn't," said Christina; "it's a cold night, and George and I brought in a regular blast with us."

She wished George would go out and see about her luggage, which she could hear arriving in the hall with a series of jerks and shocks.

Providentially they had left most of it behind them at the station; but, even as it was, she did not see how the two boxes and the hold-all she had brought were to get upstairs, or who was to take them.

However, George was far too happy to trouble about boxes. He did not rest till he had established himself in the middle of a group in front of the fire, and could look proudly round on his family, with exuberant expressions of satisfaction.

"Now, George," said Kate, the pretty sister, "you will be happy at last. It has been Kitty this and Kitty that ever since he arrived yesterday."

"You may well talk, miss!" said George, laughing delightedly.

Upon which there was much giggling and embarrassment on Kate's part, and George insisted upon making her show her face, and calling everybody to witness that she was blushing.

Then a tray was brought in by the maid, who bore the stamp of a general servant all over her, and Christina was regaled on chicken and ham and tea.

They talked of Malta. The sisters were extremely anxious to hear all about it, especially the pretty one, who seemed to think she would have enjoyed a winter there very much. She showed considerable interest in "the officers," and began a playful quarrel with George by announcing her preference for "the military" over the navy.

But George never mentioned McLeod. Surely it would have been only natural that he should. His silence had been a relief at first, but now the suspense was becoming unbearable. Once or twice Christina worked up her courage to bring in his name carelessly and indifferently, as if she knew nothing, but each time she had almost succeeded somebody else started a fresh subject.

It was a long hour and a half before any move was made.

They sat and talked, and after a time they talked sometimes of things and people Christina knew nothing about. But Kate followed every sentence with a furtive glance at her sister-in-law's face, to see what impression it made upon her.

Christina was vaguely conscious of this, just as she was vaguely conscious of what was going on round her. She felt in a dream still, as she had felt for the last week or two, and what these dream people said and did only touched the outside of her mind. She spoke and answered mechanically.

George sat very close to her, and was perfectly happy. He even once, in the intimacy of the family circle, tried to put his arm round her waist, but this was more than she could endure, and she promptly moved her chair.

It was an immense relief when one of the sisters suggested that possibly she might be glad, after her tiring journey, to go to bed.

Kate it was who took upon herself to make an apology for the house, affecting a laugh, and colouring a little as she spoke.

"I am afraid you will find this house very small after what you have been accustomed to," she said, "and I am so sorry we can't give George a dressing room. You see, when we are alone we don't need anything but a small house——"

"And, my dear, we can't afford anything but a small house," Mrs. Stoddart interrupted.

"Our flat wasn't very gigantic at Malta, was it?" said Christina, turning to George.

"Well, girls, will you show her our room, and I'll go and smoke in the dining-room," he said.

"If Mrs. Stoddart doesn't mind?" said Christina.

"Mrs. Stoddart! Did I ever hear such nonsense! She's to call you 'mother,' isn't she, mother?" said George, quickly.

Christina coloured a little.

"She shall call me just whatever she likes," Mrs. Stoddart said. "But I daresay she would rather wait for anything of that kind till she knows me a little better. George is always in a hurry."

Christina felt herself ungracious, but she said nothing. The word "mother" had no particular associations for her, but she at all times disliked to be rushed into intimacies, and felt not at all inclined to say that George's people should be her people.

She kissed Mrs. Stoddart when she said good-night, and thanked her for her welcome, and then she considered that for the present she had done enough.

It had been just what she expected, entirely what she expected, neither better nor worse.

She had only got as far as her dressing gown when George came up.

She had lingered, too tired to be sleepy or able to rest. She had unpacked her things for the night, and then she had inspected with a certain curiosity the square little room, with its threadbare carpet, and the dressing-table, which had a suspicious appearance of being draped in an old muslin dress belonging to one of the family. She even read the framed texts on the walls, and severally studied the pencil drawings of fruit and flowers, and little cottages with water barrels at the side and stiff little men in the foreground. Then she opened the window, and did not altogether dislike the increased noise of the street which followed. When George came up he found her engrossed with the shells and vases and crystal-dropped candlesticks on the mantelpiece.

"Not in bed yet?" he said—"why, Kitty, what have you been doing? What did you think of mother and the girls? I have been dying to see you alone."

His face was beaming; he was very happy, indeed, and very proud.

Christina wanted to say something pleasant.

"They were very kind," she said. "And Kate is a pretty girl."

"She is, indeed," said George, "and a clever girl, too. I must make her show you all the prizes she has got. And you know she is engaged to the Rev. Charles Smithson."

Christina was too tired to make much effort for interest.

"George dear," she said, "you can't think how dead I am. Do go down and smoke again, and I shall be in bed in ten minutes."

"But you must shut the window," said George. "Nobody could sleep in such a noise."

Christina meekly subsided into a chair; that would mean partial suffocation, but she had not energy enough to dispute the point.

At the door George hesitated. Christina, in her chair and with her back turned, had been trying to screw up her courage to a question about McLeod, when George suddenly came back to the fireplace and spoke his name.

"I say, Kitty, did you see that terrible news in the paper about your friend McLeod?"

Christina's breath suddenly failed. Had she hoped? Not consciously, but it had counted as something that until now there had always been a chance.

"What?"

"He has committed suicide, poor fellow. It is dreadfully sad——"

"How awful!" said Christina, mechanically. She knew George was watching her, and with a remnant of his old jealousy was wondering how she would take the news, but she could not help it if he thought her strangely cold.

But George's nature was too practical to leave room for any real jealousy of a dead man.

He spoke very kindly.

"I am dreadfully sorry, old child. He was a very sound chap, and a friend of yours. It must be an awful shock, and I was an ass to blurt it out."

For one moment it was in Christina's mind to tell him everything, and throw herself on his mercy and understanding, and who can say whether it would have been well or

ill had she done so? But it was only the impulse of a moment.

"Oh, don't talk to me about it!" she said. She did not know or wonder or even think what her way of taking it might appear to George.

She only felt that to ask questions and show the shocked interest of an ordinary friend was absolutely impossible to her just then, and that if he did not leave her alone, she must in some way betray herself.

When he was gone she walked over to the bed, and laid herself on it, crushing her face into the pillows, and trying to crush out all sight and sound and memory.

CHAPTER X.

THE Stoddart family, mother and daughters, were all down in the dining room in excellent time next morning. The girls laid the table themselves, and Maggie cooked the chops which were to appear in honour of their guests.

The little servant was busy in the lodger's room; after she had done, she was to tidy herself and bring in the chops. The Stoddarts kept one lodger, a clerk in a mill, who had overflowed from a boarding house next door, where he had his meals. He was a very superior young man, and they always spoke of him as a "paying guest."

Mrs. Stoddart sat in her chair by the fire; her hands were crippled with rheumatism, so there was not much she could do.

Kate, as she bustled about, laying out a few precious ornaments and one or two valued antimacassars, had her frizzy head full of thoughts. What would Christina think of the room, and when she found they had only one servant?

These were sore points with Kate, and had caused her acute suffering many a time and oft.

Almost all the people the Stoddarts knew were rich, or at least well to do, and she had often had reason to

realize their defects in this way. It was with many an effort that they kept a place in their circle of friends and relations. Christina's arrival would decidedly add to their importance.

Kate meditated over the earliest moment possible for impressing their friends with their sister-in-law, and their sister-in-law with the wealth and superiority of their friends.

"It's a blessing to-day is Sunday," she said; "it won't be so hard to know what to do with George's wife. There'll be church in the morning and evening, and if we get very hard put to it, we could take her in the afternoon, too, and between whiles we can show her the town. And to-morrow we might take her over to the Sandfords'."

"You'll have to take her, then," said Maggie; "I shan't have time."

"Maybe neither will I. You think nobody has anything to do but yourself, and I have the house and the marketing, and the extra cooking now——"

"She won't expect you to be walking after her all day long, girls," Mrs. Stoddart interposed; "there's George to take her out, and I am sure she will understand you have your own work to attend to."

Kate went round the table, and straightened the knives in discontented jerks.

"And finely a stuck-up lady like that will look down on us when she sees we have got to work," she said; "she won't like the shop, I can tell you that."

"She'll be like yourself there, Katie," said Maggie, laughing good-humouredly.

"We'd have done badly without the shop," said Mrs. Stoddart; "and if she doesn't like it, there's no reason why she should ever go near it. But, girls, I don't see any airs about her; she's just as simple to my thinking as you or me. Don't be taking fancies into your heads."

"For my part, I don't see much difference between the daughter of a lord and the daughter of any other body," said Kate. "I don't see that she dresses a bit better, or as well, for that matter, as Dora Sandford or Mrs. Williams; and the way she does her hair is out this long time. I wonder what Charles will think of her."

"Of course that is *your* chief concern," said Maggie, with jocular intent.

Kate came to kneel beside her mother and poke the fire. She was a pretty girl, in spite of her touzled hair and her ill-made dress, and she was the pet and admiration of her family.

For Kate everything must be of the best, and for Kate Maggie constantly and willingly went to the wall. And Kate, though on the whole a good girl and a good daughter and sister, was sometimes inclined to be discontented.

"I wonder," she said, "what dress she will wear this morning. I suppose she has dozens; but they can't be the very last thing, as she has been away from England so long. I wouldn't wonder if she had got every dress in London," Kate ended with a sigh.

"I don't care if she has," said Maggie, loyally. "I know somebody who looks prettier than she does, whatever she wears."

But Kate shook her head. She had an instinct.

"I wish," she said, "we had put on our old blues yesterday evening, after all. She will think it so odd to see us wearing the same dresses as we did then."

"She must just take us as she finds us," said Maggie; "whatever we did at the beginning, she'd know all about us in a week." Then she added a hasty "Get up! get up, Kate! I hear somebody coming," which belied her wise words.

It was a false alarm. Kate jumped to her feet, and shook down her dress, which she had prudently tucked above her knees; but nobody appeared except the little maid, who tapped at the door, and asked if she should ring the bell, for the chops were done.

Kate looked down at her dress despairingly. "Did you ever see anything like the way this hangs?" she said. "It's short in one place and long in the other. Yours is better, Maggie, but mine is just awful!"

"Well, you would have the skirt cut the new shape, and the woman didn't know how," said Maggie; "and I was content with the way she was accustomed to. Don't go whisking about that way, Kate; sit down, and keep sitting

as much as you can, and then it looks all right. I am sure I hear somebody coming."

It was not a false alarm this time. Christina came in a moment later, quite unconscious that she had been discussed. George's family were to her so completely uninteresting that it did not occur to her that it might be different with them. She looked much more tired than the evening before; the usual want of colour in her cheeks was exaggerated into a dead white, her very lips were colourless, and there were dark lines under her eyes.

When George came down they had prayers, and then came breakfast, after which Christina was taken to the drawing room and left to talk to Mrs. Stoddart till it was time for church.

As a rule, the family frequented on Sundays the little Methodist meeting-house where the Rev. Charles Smithson held sway, but, from a vague idea of its aristocratic superiority, Christina was taken to an Episcopalian Church. Then came a midday dinner and more talking round the fire, in the middle of which Christina managed to steal upstairs to her room.

Would it ever be possible to be alone here, or to have an hour to herself?

There did not seem to be much prospect of it, for, ten minutes later, Maggie appeared in answer to a summons to come in, and with the best intentions in the world that Christina should not feel dull or lonely.

"Won't you come down?" she said. "Tea is just coming up, and Charles is here."

"Who is Charles?" said Christina.

Maggie looked a little shocked and hurt at her ignorance.

"Haven't you heard about *Charles?*" she said; "he is the gentleman Kate is engaged to. He is a clergyman, and he has only got a small church as yet; but Kate and I think it is a very nice one, and he has taken so much trouble with it, and he has put up a lovely tablet to his wives over the pulpit."

"His wives?" said Christina, a little bewildered.

"He has been married, you know, before, twice," Maggie explained. "I don't know that I should like it, but

Kate doesn't mind. And it certainly is a lovely tablet, with room left for himself; of course, Kate will have to go in too, but they can manage that by leaving out the text he intended to put at the end."

"Oh," said Christina, "I understand."

"Everybody thinks so much of Charles," pursued Maggie. "We don't approve of Sunday visitors as a rule, but, of course, he is different. He and Kate are just suited for each other. Kate is very clever, you know. She went in for ever so many prizes at the High School; most of those books in the drawing room are hers; I daresay you noticed them?"

Christina was inclined to wish that the Stoddarts as a family were not quite so much attached to each other.

"Won't you come down?" said Maggie; "you are not shy, are you? I used always to be frightened of Charles till we got to know him so well. He is so very good and so very particular."

Christina laughed out in spite of herself. She thought her courage would be equal to the encounter of a Methodist clergyman who was engaged to Kate Stoddart.

They went downstairs together, Maggie full of admiration of her guest's intrepidity.

"Charles" was sitting on the sofa beside his fiancée, with a decorous width of chintz between them.

He was a stout, flabby man, with a black moustache and whiskers, and a carefully oiled head of straight black hair.

He rose and came forward to greet Christina in deliberate, unctuous tones.

"I am so glad to welcome you to our midst," he said.

"How do you do?" said Christina.

She had already noted that his coat was greasy and that his nails were black, while a general air of uncleanliness hung over him. But Kate looked upon him proudly.

"I trust, Mrs. Stoddart, you are not fatigued after your journey?"

Kate broke in in playful remonstrance.

"Oh, Charles, no ceremony in a family party. You are almost brother and sister!"

In spite of all she could do, Christina knew that she shuddered visibly.

But it was quite right. Why should not this creature call her by her Christian name?

"I shall be only too happy if Mrs. Stoddart will so favour me," he said, and, in spite of her misery, Christina felt impelled to wild laughter. But then she remembered George, and knew she must not disgrace herself before her new relations.

They all went for a walk to exhibit the sights of Manchester to Christina. She found it a very dreary entertainment; they went through streets of shuttered shops, and the conversation was restricted to a level of decorous Sunday gloom. "Charles'" church was kept to the last that it might create a due impression, and Christina was reduced to be absolutely thankful for the tablet to "Elizabeth" and "Jane Emily," each the "beloved wife of the Reverend Charles Joseph Smithson," in that it gave something to remark about, and was the sole attempt to furnish the absolute bareness round.

On the way home they met many of the fashionable of Manchester returning from afternoon church, and Christina was introduced to various gorgeously clad ladies and gentlemen, who greeted George with the fervour of old acquaintance, and welcomed his wife to Manchester with outstretched hands and strong accents.

Christina tried for one instant to fancy the feelings of her father and mother could they see her now; but imagination has its limits, and such a picture was too inconceivable.

She knew everybody meant to be kind, and she did her best to be pleasant in return, but it was unconsciously after the fashion in which she would have talked politely to the shopgirl who sold her ribbons or the coachman who drove her carriage, in the old times, and not as a young wife greeting her husband's friends.

When they talked to her in return as upon a level of equality, she felt herself stiffening instinctively.

On the whole, she preferred George's family to their friends, and after late tea that evening, when Kate and the Rev. Charles had been dismissed to the dining room upon plausible excuses, she found Mrs. Stoddart and Maggie natural and pleasant.

They talked freely of their poverty, of their struggles, and later on of the shop, introducing that part of the subject with a certain hesitation, and relieved by the matter-of-fact way in which Christina accepted it.

It was not very successful, the shop. Mrs. Stoddart, with her weak lungs and her rheumatic fingers, was not able to do much more than to keep the books, and Charles did not like Kate to have anything to say to it, so since her engagement Maggie had been obliged to give up her situation in the post office, which she had liked, and come home to superintend the millinery, which she detested. They were horrified at Christina's suggestion, that while George and she were there she might be able to help.

After Mr. Smithson had left, Mrs. Stoddart and Christina were for a time alone together, while his sisters went with George to the dining room, where he smoked.

Mrs. Stoddart approached the subject of Christina's position in the family very simply and directly.

"I want you to understand, my dear, that we all know that this is not the kind of life nor are we the kind of people that you are accustomed to."

Christina was a little startled, and found it difficult to reply. It was no use denying that Mrs. Stoddart was right.

Every one until now, including George, had persisted in ignoring anything unusual about her position, and Mrs. Stoddart's words and the kindness of her voice touched her, as kindness always did.

She knelt down on the rug, and laid her hand, with a kind of shy caress, upon the old woman's knee.

"I am sure, if you will let me, I shall be very fond of you," she said."

"Well, but you understand: George, dear boy, loves us all so much that he sees nothing. I have done my best to give the girls a good education, but of course I know we are not in your class, my dear."

"Don't say any more," said Christina; "you make me feel I must have been behaving horridly."

"You mustn't feel that, then, for it would not be true. You have been behaving very sweetly and kindly. But I want you to remember that, though George may want you to stay on with us, none of us will be in the least offended

if you don't pay us a long visit, though you are as welcome as sunshine for just as long as you will stay. But you will want to visit your own father and mother."

Mrs. Stoddart did not understand everything; she did not understand that the idea of bringing George into the presence of her father and mother was to Christina awful.

"And now, there is nothing more we need say about that. You know without my telling you what a dear boy George is. He's the best son and the best brother, and so I am sure he is the best husband, in the world; though perhaps his mother should not say so."

"He is very, very kind to me," said Christina, feeling her words inadequate.

Then Mrs. Stoddart began to tell her stories of George: of his goodness and his cleverness; how hard he had worked at school; how never in his life had he come to his mother with unpaid debts; how, when he had first got into the navy, he had pinched and screwed, and, his mother suspected, had suffered a good deal, that everything might go to his sisters.

In the middle George himself came in, glowing with pleasure to see his mother and his wife on such good terms, and he summoned them to the dining room, where the mother read prayers, and afterwards they all went to bed.

One day was over, and what a long day it had been! But what about the next and the next and the next?

CHAPTER XI.

"THE Cameron Highlanders: Lieutenant G. P. F. McFerran to be captain, *vice* the Hon. A. McLeod, deceased."

The paper slipped through Christina's fingers, and rustled on to the floor.

George, who was smoking by the fire with his back half turned to her, moved round in his chair.

"What on earth is the matter, Kitty? You are as white as a sheet!" he said, in a tone of dismay.

"Nothing," said Christina, sharply.

"Nothing? With a face like that? Give me the paper, you goose, if you won't tell me what it is."

It was by a most foolish instinct that she drew the paper away from his hand, and a moment after she had done so she knew it.

George made up his mind to see it at once, and took it from her a little roughly, glancing down the sheet she had been reading till McLeod's name caught his eye.

Without that movement of Christina's, it would have been nothing; as it was, he was annoyed.

"Is this what you were going to faint about?" he said.

"I wasn't going to faint," said Christina, irritably. "I don't think it is very surprising that it should startle me."

"I must say I think it is," said George, "considering you know perfectly well the man is dead. A nice exhibition you would have made of yourself if any one else had been here. What in the world could they have thought?"

"I don't know in what way I made an exhibition of myself," said Christina. "But if any one had noticed anything, they would have thought that it is not pleasant to see a friend—a man one knew so well—a—— What do I care what anybody thinks, or what you think, for the matter of that!"

By way of proving how little she cared, she began an unsteady laugh, drew one or two short breaths, and burst out crying.

George was in absolute consternation. Never in the whole course of his acquaintance with Christina had such a thing happened before.

It must mean something dreadful. He must have spoken more harshly than he had known, or she must be ill, or—he would not give way to the last supposition.

His utter dismay and perturbation made Christina laugh amid her sobs, which put the finishing touch to his alarm, and made it difficult for her to restrain him from rushing out for water and assistance.

She hardly knew herself what was the matter with her or why she had so suddenly broken down, and the idea of having the family called in to console her, helped her to regain self-command better than anything else.

George was very penitent.

"What did I say, darling? Dearest old child, I didn't mean to be so cross. Of course, it was perfectly natural that you should be upset at seeing that in the paper. Poor fellow! I am sure I am myself——"

It was not possible that he could understand that to hear McLeod spoken of was absolute torture.

But he could see that the subject was not a well chosen one just at present.

"You are a tender-hearted old child," he said, talking to convince himself as well as Christina that there was no more in it than this, "and I am a rough brute who knows nothing about women. But, darling, tell me, haven't you been well lately? I won't say another word if that is the reason; but you haven't been quite nice to me lately, you know, or to my people, for the matter of that."

Christina had hidden her face against his shoulder, and he could not see the vivid flush with which she greeted his words. Tell him? She knew what telling him would mean: an uncontrolled delight, a fuss over every step she took and thing she did, and hints which would soon make what she had told him public property.

That was all in the near future, but she would stave it off a little longer if she could.

"I wish, old child, you would try to be a little civiller to my people," said George, immensely careful to speak gently now.

"Civil?" said Christina. "George! am I not civil?"

"Well, civil is not the word, perhaps; friendly is what I mean, friendly and—affectionate."

"I'll try, really," said Christina, humbly. "I offered to help in the shop, and you wouldn't let me."

"I should think not! And if I had, what use would you have been? No, I mean go up to the mother sometimes and give her a kiss, and the girls—you and they ought to have any amount to gossip about, and there you are as formal as the first day you met; and especially with Kate."

"How can I talk to Kate, George? All her confidences are about Mr. Smithson, and I really can't abide Mr. Smithson."

"I don't see why, I am sure," said George, reprovingly. "He is a most good man, and very good-looking——"

"Good-looking!"

"Well, isn't he? I thought all women admired black hair and that sort of thing. But, however," George added, hastily, in answer to the expression of Christina's face, "not to talk of him, there are those cousins of ours, the Sandfords. You never even take the trouble of trying to talk to George Sandford, and he's a very good fellow, and he has been awfully kind to mother and the girls.'"

Christina sighed; she had not been prepossessed by Mr. George Sandford's voice and appearance.

George had subsided into comfort, and a leisurely inspection of his finger nails warned her, even before the appearance of his knife, of what was coming, and put the climax to her feeling of nervous irritation.

"What is more, Kit," he said, preparing for an operation on his little finger, "you must consider your husband's interests. Sandford has thousands of pounds' worth of machinery in his mills, and, if I decide to leave the navy, he might offer me something. I intend to give him a hint that I am thinking of it."

Christina assented, and sat still, looking straight before her into the fire. She was acutely conscious that George having finished one hand had begun upon the other, and it seemed to her that, provided he would stop, anything would be endurable.

"There's this too, Kitty: while I am in the navy, if I get a home appointment, as I expect I shall in a few months, I shall want you to live on here with my mother."

"O George!"

"Well, I can't see any objection. There's the lodger's room, which, of course, you could take, and it would be much nicer for you than living alone, and a very pleasant arrangement all round."

"But can't I be with you?"

George's face flushed with pleasure.

"I wish you could, darling. But be reasonable, Kitty. If you came with me, you would probably have to be alone most of the time, and I haven't a notion of course where

that would be. Then, we are rather pinched about money just at present. We spent a good deal in Malta somehow, without getting much for it. And you can stay here more cheaply than anywhere else, and do these dear people a good turn at the same time."

"Very well, George," said Christina, meekly. He had put his knife back in his pocket, and that at least was something to be thankful for.

"Of course there are your own people. But they haven't been extra civil." George proceeded to extract a toothpick from his waistcoat pocket.

Christina jumped up.

"Well, there's no hurry about all that," she said, sharply; "and, George, if you consider the dining room the place to perform your toilet, I, for my part, prefer to sit in my bedroom!"

With which she walked majestically out of the room, leaving him completely astounded.

She sat down wearily by the window in her bedroom. What was making her so childishly irritable? She had borne as much and more many a time and oft from George. Was she so mean, so selfish, as in her own pain to take a certain satisfaction in the pain of other people? The words would get themselves said; Christina did not believe that by any effort of will she could have sat still and borne with George for five minutes longer.

The stab of pain she had felt on seeing McLeod's name had turned to the irritable unhappiness of the past weeks. McLeod's place was filled, and it seemed so soon.

McFerran, if he was not glad—Christina was sure he would not be glad—must at least, as the poorest man in the regiment, feel that he had profited. Somebody else would ride McLeod's ponies, live in his rooms, take his place at mess, and march in front of his company at parade. It was inevitable, natural, desirable—nobody could wish for anything else, least of all McLeod himself.

She was conscious that her vague irritation against all the world culminated when she thought of George. She would have liked to face him and startle him out of his complacent composure with the story of the thing she had done. She would have liked to go and tell him that but

for her McLeod might have got well. That was the thought that haunted her always, and would not be shaken off.

Never, never would she be free from George now unless she cut herself free. There was no refuge for her from him—no escape if at this moment he came to her, as he might do, to ask why she had left him so abruptly.

But it mattered very little; there was nothing that made any particular difference, or that was really worth struggling about.

It had taken a good deal of physical and mental suffering to bring Christina even to *think that she thought* this.

For his part, George was quite startled and disturbed enough without any such revelation as she might have made.

He was angry, he was uneasy; he realized that Christina was not in the last like herself, while he was quite at a loss as to what was wrong, beyond feeling a vague suspicion of McLeod's memory.

Jealousy did not come naturally to George; he had too satisfactory an estimation of himself, and, to do him justice, too honest a faith in Christina as his wife. Now, in the midst of his admiring family and friends, only the vaguest remembrance of his discomfort at Malta came to him—a dim consciousness that at one time he had almost found reason to doubt his infalliability in her eyes.

But he was disturbed and uncomfortable, and, not being reticent, his discomfort found half expression to his mother that evening.

He had great faith in his mother: if it were possible to bring what was wrong right, she would do it; if there was any way out of a difficulty, she would find it.

"I am rather worried about Kitty," he said; "I don't think she can be well, mother. She has been so awfully easily put out lately. She was very sharp to Kate at tea."

"I don't think she meant it," said Mrs. Stoddart, "and I am sure Kate wasn't offended. She does look very white."

"She never has much colour. But—but I am worried about her altogether. She hardly seems glad to be with me, or—— I don't know what is wrong."

"I think, George," said Mrs. Stoddart, gently, "that there is only a little patience wanted, and that then it will

all come right. I think, my boy, she needs you to be very, very patient with her just now."

Then George understood, and once again, and this time with a heart full of rejoicing, he called himself a brute.

CHAPTER XII.

It was not a little Christina's own fault that her life with the Stoddarts did not flow entirely smoothly. She was giving way to an introspective, morbid wretchedness, which made her irritable as well as unhappy.

If she could have pulled herself together, and made up her mind to shut her eyes and ears to some things, she could have found much in the people she met to interest her. They were for the most part intelligent business people, some of them very well educated, and most of them interesting in their different ways. But Christina in her present mood only knew that their loud voices and their accents and their manners grated upon her nerves.

Once, within a few weeks of her return to England, there came a letter from her mother, inviting her and George to town, or to Scotland in the autumn if they preferred it; and she, knowing that George had a certain yearning for social elevation which would have made him willing to overlook much previous coolness, said nothing to him when she refused. Not that, at least; not now, and not with George, could she bear to go to her old home.

But nevertheless she made no attempt to be happy where she was.

Mrs. Stoddart, knowing that there was something wrong, would gladly have done her best to help, but Christina half unconsciously held her at a distance. Maggie was good-natured and friendly, and all, except perhaps Kate, did their best to make the days pass pleasantly. Kate was jealous of Christina, while at the same time she gave her an unwilling admiration, which drove her to secret imitation of her sister-in-law's clothes and voice and man-

ner of speaking and walking. Poor Kate had had many aspirations and dreams. She had many a time imagined herself exalted into another and a higher sphere where shops were unheard of, and lords and ladies were to be daily met.

Kate felt that given the chance she would have been quick to learn, and would soon have been able to hold her own with the best. And such things did happen; it was only necessary that some dashing officer or some fascinating scion of nobility should happen to fall in love with her, and the thing was done. But, alas! to fall in love with her he must first meet her, and there was the difficulty, the cruel difficulty, which had rendered all poor Kate's dreams futile.

It was such a very small, grovelling little ambition, and yet it was not to be fulfilled.

The Rev. Charles Smithson had been a come-down for the ideal, though he was an excellent match for the real Kate Stoddart; it was not without a struggle that the practical side of her mind had conquered.

Now it was over, and everything was once more rose-coloured, while the only reminiscence of her past dream was a certain jealousy of Christina, who had had all the advantages that Kate had longed for, and then had married —George! Fond as she was of her brother, Kate did not understand how she could have done that.

To do Kate justice, she would not now have exchanged the Rev. Charles, with his oily hair and his two dead wives, for the smartest officer in the regiments which often marched past the shop.

Christina sometimes saw her eyes light up when he came in, and realized with unreasonable surprise that these horrid people really were fond of each other.

And everybody liked George. Among all these girls she met he might have got many a wife, who would have made him perfectly happy and adored him.

Though he was devoted to her, Christina did not think that she was making him happy; it would perhaps be better for him if she was dead, and he was free to marry some one who would care for him and would suit him better.

She was not herself. Had she been more physically

strong, she would at least have made an effort to shake off the overwhelming depression which increased every day.

She missed McLeod so dreadfully, and she missed the interest in life which he had given her.

Days and weeks and months crept away without change.

George was appointed to a ship in the Channel squadron, and Christina filled the lodger's room in the Stoddarts' house.

She had not energy or desire to make a struggle for a home of her own, where she could at least have had freedom to a certain extent.

She just let everything slide, and submitted, and lived on from one day to another.

She had done scarcely a line of writing since her return to England. There was no possible privacy; her sisters-in-law were always in and out, and considered it their duty not to allow Christina to sit and mope by herself.

And what was the good of bothering?

She was restless; she walked more than she should have done, and repelled any special care or attention fiercely.

She could not bear to drive. On the few occasions when it had been necessary she had been seized with a wild terror —the same terror that sometimes came to her in the dead of the night, and held her awake for hours, shuddering and unnerved.

Week followed week, with only Mr. Smithson's daily visits and George's occasional returns to mark them. There was nothing to look forward to—no bright spot in the future.

Her baby. Deep in Christina's mind was the morbid belief that God would never allow her to have such a gift. The belief had taken an almost insane possession of her mind. She would die, or it would die.

She was so entirely alone. Her secret nobody knew, and nobody should ever know. Each day it seemed to her a more unforgettable, irremediable thing that she had done.

Had she been again called upon to decide, she would have done the same thing, had she been sure it was best for McLeod. For him she had offended against the laws of God and man, she told herself, and had she done well even for him? Was she a wicked woman? Had she

put into the hands of a madman the means of taking his own life? But Christina remembered the straightforward, steady look in his eyes, and knew she had not said good-by to a madman.

She would tell herself that what she had done was to release him from a lifetime of suffering, and that the responsibility had been left with him, as a sane man; but such reminders were only words, and conveyed no meaning to her mind.

Sometimes, in a mad impulse for confession, she would sit among the others with the very words upon her lips, and suddenly spring up and leave the room to keep them back.

Once, twice, alone in her room, she found a strange kind of relief in writing down from beginning to end everything that had happened, and as often she hastily and furtively burned what she had written, raking the ashes over and over again in the fireplace, that she might be certain no line was left to betray her.

She had been tempted many times by the thought of confessing it all to some priest of McLeod's religion, but something—a hesitation over preliminaries, an unwillingness to put the thing into words, a fear that even the priest would turn from her when he heard—had kept her back.

She was perhaps just then in a state not very far removed from madness herself.

Had she loved McLeod—did she love him—as a woman loves the one man in the world for her? Christina did not know. She had had no affections in her life by which to judge what she felt for him.

At least, in going out of her life, he had left behind him a blank which could never quite be filled up.

It was only by living from day to day without once looking ahead that she could live at all, and every day, as she grew less able to go about and more condemned to the house and her own thoughts, endurance grew more difficult.

CHAPTER XIII.

One February afternoon, Christina lay on the sofa in her room, feeling very weak and depressed.

She had come to the stage of recovery when every morning it is a weariness to wake to a fresh day, sure to be exactly like yesterday and to-morrow—a stage when each hour seems unending and everything is a trouble.

The dark, short winter evening had closed in, but she lay in the dusk, too languid to get up and light her lamp or poke her dying fire. It was not worth while; she did not feel any particular interest in her book, and she was tired of reading.

It was very dismal, and she felt very miserable. Tears, half of vague self-pity and half of weakness, welled into her eyes.

The door opened, and Kate Stoddart came noisily in and Christina looked up, with a peevish exclamation.

"Gracious, Kitty! What on earth are you doing in the dark?" the girl said. "I have a tea tray in my hand for you, but I am afraid to move."

Christina rose wearily and lighted the lamp, and Kate came over to put down her tea tray by the sofa.

She was full of health and happiness; the world was going excellently well for her, and she was in the full excitement of preparing for her marriage, which was fixed for the next month. It was in her nature to tramp heavily and set down cups with a clatter, and she would have laughed at the idea of its being a real annoyance to Christina that she could never bring her her tea without spilling some on the tray.

"We have had such an afternoon!" said Kate. "Mother and I have chosen all my stockings and shoes, and *such* a business as it was! And then we met Charles——" Kate caught a lack of interest in Christina's face, and paused in what she was saying.

"Kitty, you really ought to come out for a drive," she began again, in a different tone. "I can't imagine why you won't."

"I don't care to, thank you."

Kate was a little discouraged; she began to pour out tea, and tried to think of something to say which would interest Christina. But when Charles was unsuccessful, what hope was there?

Christina broke the silence, but not very pleasantly.

"I do wish, Kate, if you want to copy my hats, you would tell me so, and I would be very glad to help you. You have just spoilt that one."

Kate coloured.

"Charles liked it," she said, with some hesitation; she knew herself it was not a success. "And I didn't mean it for a copy of yours—at least I didn't mean it to be like."

"I wouldn't mind your copying if you didn't caricature," said Christina, pettishly. "Get out my gray hat, Kate—it's in the top part of the wardrobe. You can have it if it suits you."

She felt she was ungracious in her words. Kate's ways and manners all irritated her, and sharp words seemed to come so much more easily than kind ones of late. She tried to make up by a special kindness in deeds to this sister-in-law, but though Kate, with her limited wardrobe, did not refuse, it was not the same thing.

She would have liked to say no to the gray hat, if she had not been forced to see how very different it looked to her attempted imitation, and Kate loved finery with all her heart.

She had not strength of mind for a refusal after she had gone to the glass, and seen the hat on the top of her brown frizzled hair.

Having accepted her gift, she did her best to be friendly and genial to her sister-in-law in return.

"Kitty, you really ought to try and get out a little. You will never get stronger if you stay in here."

"How can I go out? The pavements would tire me."

"Well, you might at least have people in to see you."

"There's nobody I care to see, thank you," said Christina, wearily.

Kate hesitated. "Would you care to see Charles?" she said, colouring again.

"Great Scott! See *who?*" said Christina, in astonishment.

"I mean—I mean—even as a clergyman. You might find him a comfort."

Christina felt she was rude and ungracious; the girl was offering of her best.

"Thank you, Kate; it is very good of you," she said, gently, "but I don't feel up to it."

"But clergymen are different from other men," Kate persisted, encouraged by her manner. "Charles is so good. He has known so much sorrow."

"But I haven't got a sorrow in the world, have I?" said Christina, bitterly—"a devoted husband, a delightful child——"

"I don't think you ought to have," said Kate, dubiously; Christina's intense depression puzzled her not a little; "but you have been sent weakness and weariness for the time, of course, and Charles will teach you how all things work together for good."

"Could he, indeed?" said Christina. "Well, I think I could tell him about something he would be puzzled to find any good in."

"That's just it," said Kate, eagerly; "we don't understand. Charles told me this morning that he had thought God had afflicted him sorely in taking away from him two wives; but now he saw that all the time he had only been working for his greater happiness in giving him one far more precious and better loved," Kate ended, softly.

There was nothing ludicrous to her in the idea that Heaven should have expended so much trouble and made so many failures in trying to find a suitable wife for the Rev. Charles Smithson.

Christina in charity did not laugh. She said, soberly, "It is a bit hard on the wives, isn't it?" and Kate was vaguely suspicious of her tone. She stared at Christina, a little puzzled.

"But Charles says," she began again, and with a sigh Christina prepared to listen to further eulogies. But George's entrance freed her.

George was not at his best. He had one of his extremely objectionable colds in the head, and he was coughing and sneezing with an unpleasing frequency, but at least he was safe not to inflict second-hand sermons upon her.

"Well, Kit," he said, "you look snug. Where's the kid?"

That was always his first question.

"It was asleep when I last heard of it," said Christina; "go and see if it is awake, if you like."

"And I'll bring him in here. You want cheering up, old child, and you ought to have the boy to keep you company all afternoon."

With which he went off cheerfully for his son.

It was a wonderful baby in his eyes—the most remarkable and fascinating child in existence. George could safely be intrusted with it; he was indeed almost qualified to take entire charge of it, down to making its food and giving it its bath.

It was a small baby, with the usual bald head and readiness to tears.

Christina was disappointed in it, or rather in her feelings towards it. As she grew stronger, she was beginning to shake off her first fixed belief that the child would die—or *go mad*. That punishment, which would include George and the child itself, would surely be unjust.

She had hoped and longed that, if the child were to live, it might be a girl, and so more her own. This baby, this boy, seemed to her almost absurdly like its father.

She even fancied she discovered a certain bumptiousness about its ways. It would grow up a worthy, eminently respectable, completely uninteresting and second-rate young man.

"Here he is, mamma!" said George, triumphantly. "Let us see, does he know you."

"Know me!" said Christina, peevishly. "What nonsense, George! Don't bring him over here, please. I am too tired to take him."

George looked very slightly disappointed.

"All right, Kitty; he's a good weight, really. You mustn't bother mamma, young man."

"Don't be so ridiculous," said Christina, fretfully.

"You would think George was the child's mother," said Kate, with much want of tact. "Now, baby, Aunt Kate is going to catch you!"

Whereupon George ran round the room with an exceedingly bewildered baby, and Kate ran after them.

Christina lay still and endured, even when George knocked over a chair in his wild career, with a crash which shook the little room.

She was relieved when he was seized with a sudden fit of sneezing, which made him pause, and put the finishing touch to the baby's gradual increasing terror and disgust. It was carried off to its nurse by Kate, roaring lustily.

When George sneezed, he did so heartily and without restraint, and also for a considerable time.

In the middle of a paroxysm he suddenly remembered that he had a letter in his pocket for Christina, which he had forgotten in the delights of his son's society.

"From your mother, dear, I think, isn't it?" he said.

Christina took the letter without misgiving.

She had heard many times from her mother during the autumn, and the breach between them seemed to be superficially healed.

"DEAREST CHRISTINA: I suppose there is a possible hotel somewhere near you, where I could stay for the night? I am thinking of coming to pay you a visit next week, as you won't come to us; and if I come, I expect your father will insist on coming, too, especially as he is anxious to see his grandson. I must say I think it is your place to come to us. However, I have some natural affection, if you have not. I will wire when I have made up my mind. Your father I hardly see at present from morning to night. As usual, he is grumbling about money matters. I am afflicted with the dullest set of people in the house you can imagine. Old Lady St. Ives is waiting to pounce upon me when I stop writing. You may be quite sure I didn't ask her, but she wrote and coolly proposed herself, and your father wouldn't let me say no. Have you heard that Eileen Grant is going to be married—at last?"

And so on. Christina just glanced over the end of the letter. The beginning had given her quite enough to think about.

Of all things this was the worst—worse, far worse than if she had brought herself to pay the dreaded visit with George.

Could this thing not be prevented?

George came and read the letter over her shoulder, after a habit of his which always irritated her to the verge of endurance.

He, too, had a moment of dismay, but excitement followed it quickly.

"Kitty! Good heavens! Your mother! Well, upon my word, I am very glad. It is quite the right thing, after the way they behaved. It's a sort of apology, don't you see? But——"

"That's just it!" said Christina, impatiently: "*but*——"

"This is a very small place to receive them," said George, a little dashed; but almost immediately his spirits rose. Lord Frederick, in the days when George had met him, had been by no means an alarming or particular person.

And what a sensation the visit would create among all the Stoddarts' Manchester friends!

"It's quite the right thing and the civil thing," he repeated, with satisfaction.

Then another view of the subject struck him.

"And there's the boy! That's it, Kitty; I've hit the right nail on the head now! It's the boy that is bringing them. By Jove! I suppose everything will go to him—the place—eh, old woman?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Christina, sharply.

Why should she be ashamed to let her father and mother know the life she had chosen for herself? But she was—she was ashamed, bitterly ashamed of the Stoddarts and all connected with them. If she had loved George it would have been so different. There were plenty of men, she told herself, plenty of day-labourers, of whom a woman need never be ashamed. But George—what was he to show as the reason for the abandonment of her class and of all outside luxuries?

"We must have everything very nice," George went on, with excitement. "The girls shall have new dresses, and

if your people dine with us we can get a man to wait, and——"

"Don't be absurd!"

What possible difference could any petty change of the kind make? George was ashamed of the surroundings; Christina was ashamed of the people themselves.

He was somewhat crestfallen.

"Well, look here, Kitty," he said, in a half-ashamed tone, "if I thought it wouldn't vex the mother—do you think it would be well for us to take better rooms for the time?"

"No, no, no!" said Christina, vehemently; "if they must come—if they must—they must just come here!"

"Very well, dear, very well," said George, a little gratified on the whole; "but we will have everything very nice. And I must get rid of my cold, and get a few days' extra leave. We must think of the boy, Kitty. I must say I am very glad. It will cheer you up, old child. Now I must go down and tell the girls. Holy Moses! won't they be in a state of excitement!"

Hardly more excited and exhilarated was it possible for them to be than was George himself.

He was full of gratification and excitement and importance.

In his excitement he left the door half open behind him, and Christina could hear him inform the little maid of all work when he met her on the stairs that she must be very particular over her work, and have some clean caps and aprons for next week, for Lord and Lady Frederick Lorrimer were coming upon a visit.

CHAPTER XIV.

GEORGE got a great deal of satisfaction out of the Lorrimers' prospective visit. It was so easy to let slip in casual conversation that they expected Lord and Lady Frederick Lorrimer, his wife's people, next week.

Christina, in her own room, was spared much of this.

The Stoddarts, as a family, were perturbed by the prospect of this great event. The house in general underwent an even more anxious furbishing up than before Christina's arrival, as though the Lorrimers were expected to be consumed with a desire to inspect every hole and corner. Maggie and Kate nearly came to an unusual quarrel in a discussion over the right way to address Lady Frederick.

Christina herself would have given worlds that her mother at least should remain away. She found herself unconsciously looking at George and his family through her mother's eyes. What would she say or do, and would Christina have to be ashamed of her, in her turn, for rudeness? Her father had been very good-natured and friendly to George once, and was in no wise particular as to his friends; but would he be content to judge his daughter's husband in the same easy-going way?

And then Christina said to herself, what did it matter? When she was so miserable, could anything make her more so? But she only said this; she knew very well that she felt each little worry and annoyance far more keenly than she would have felt it a year ago.

Everything irritated her; she could not bear George to come near her or to touch her. When he came to ask her anxiously how she was, or to tuck the rug round her and kiss her as she lay on the sofa, it was almost more than she could endure. She had a perverse desire, not always conquered, to contradict everything he said—to want the window open when he thought it ought to be shut, and to sit up when he wished her to lie down.

Some days she gave way to this irritability more than others, and astonished and hurt George by her tart replies to his most well-meant remarks and her obstinate contradiction of his wishes.

She hurt him, too, by her carelessness of feeling towards the baby, which she sometimes found herself elaborately exaggerating.

He could not understand, he had not the smallest clue, to what had changed her.

Christina knew she was behaving very badly. She knew she ought to rouse herself and fight against this depression;

she knew she ought to get up off her sofa, and begin to go about as usual.

She knew, too, that George had done nothing to deserve such a bad return for his kindness, and that she was encouraging instead of struggling with her intense dislike to him; but the knowledge did not rouse her to any effort —it only disturbed and irritated her.

She could not bear to rouse herself and take up life again; she could not bear to leave her room, and once more have to mix with the Stoddarts' friends.

Once, in a burst of repentance after some very sharp words, she told George that she was sorry, that she knew she was behaving hatefully, and that she wished she was dead, for she did nothing but make him and everybody else unhappy. But though he was very kind, and was hopeful for the moment, the next day it was just the same as ever.

The thought of McLeod and of the irretrievable thing she had done was never out of Christina's thoughts, and she had plenty of time to brood upon it. During that terrible drive, nearly a year ago, she had not had time to be frightened, but the shock of that and of the next few days had been telling upon her ever since.

Try as she might to keep them out of her mind, she found herself going over and over them again, day and night; and most often of all that scene which she had not seen, when McLeod by her means found death, till there was absolutely a vivid picture of what had happened in her mind.

Perhaps the prospect of her mother's visit came to some extent as a good thing to her. Even a disagreeable necessity for some sort of effort was better than none at all. She was necessarily a little roused from her morbid misery, and, though it was only to active unhappiness, it did her good.

She made no effort to prepare for her mother; she left it all to chance. She could not turn the Stoddarts out of their own house, nor could she suggest to George that it would be better for him to keep out of sight; so as these things must be borne, nothing else mattered.

There was a pleasing uncertainty about the Lorrimers' arrival: a series of telegrams with varying information kept the Stoddarts at a stretch of anxiety.

And when it did come off, the visit was in more ways than one a disappointment.

About four o'clock on the eventful afternoon, Kate came rushing into Christina's room to say a cab had driven up to the door with boxes. Was it possible, was it at all possible that Lady Frederick intended to stay with them? And if she did, what in the world was to be done, when they had even to put George out of the house for want of room.

Christina reassured her sister-in-law; she was quite certain her mother would not want to stay.

Then wouldn't Kitty see her in the parlour? If she would only change her mind about receiving her mother in her own room—the stair carpet and the carpet on the landing were so shabby.

Well, if it must be up here! Kate rushed about the room, patting and pulling cushions and chairs into shape, and brushing away a litter of papers from the floor.

George meanwhile was fussing mightily. He rushed to the glass to put his tie straight, and to assure himself that his hair was correctly divided; then he paid a flying visit to the nursery to see that the baby was properly arrayed to receive his grandmother; and then he hurried down stairs.

Christina got up off the sofa, put away her book, and went slowly across her room to the landing outside, keeping up the figment that nothing mattered to her now. She could see and hear all that went on downstairs.

George was in the hall by the time the maid had opened the door.

He found himself confronted by a grandly dressed person, who for one moment of terrible possibility he had almost greeted as his mother-in-law. From this awful mistake a second thought fortunately preserved him.

Then, when the maid's inquiries had been answered, Christina could hear her mother's voice.

"We are very glad to see you, Lady Frederick, very glad," said George, effusively, so effusively that Christina for a moment feared a filial embrace.

"Is Mrs. Stoddart——"

"Christina has been longing to see you," said George.

"I must introduce myself, I suppose, Lady Frederick. I am George."

Christina was glad she could not see her mother's face when the announcement was made. She could interpret the tone of her "Indeed? How do you do?" quite well enough.

Then followed an apology from George, an apology which she had dreaded and warned him against, about the smallness of the house.

Lady Frederick did not pay much attention to him. She declined to send away her cab, and left it and her maid to wait for her, and she and George came upstairs together, he talking a good deal.

There was nothing very effusive about the meeting of mother and daughter.

Lady Frederick said "My dearest child!" and took both Christina's hands and kissed her affectionately.

"My dear girl, how frightfully ill you look! Go and put on your hat. I want to take you off to the hotel with me."

Lady Frederick did not look much older than her daughter. She wore a sailor hat and a coat and skirt, and, whether owing to art or Nature, her hair was entirely without sign of gray.

She was tall and slight, with a figure rather like Christina's, and she moved well, and brought with her a rustle of silk petticoats and a faint suggestion of sweet-scented violets.

Christina looked at her with admiring pleasure.

George pressed forward.

"Won't you give us the pleasure of your company at dinner, Lady Frederick? Christina and all of us will be dreadfully disappointed if you don't. And I hope Lord Frederick is here?"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Stoddart," said Lady Frederick, sweetly; "but I hope to bring my daughter to the hotel with me."

Christina broke in hastily, in terror of some allusion to Christian names.

"But where is papa?"

"He went straight to the hotel. Come, Christina, can't

you take me to your room? Mr. Stoddart will excuse us?" in polite dismissal.

Christina felt she need not have been in the least anxious for George; Lady Frederick's polite words were safeguards for her meaning.

Almost before the door of Christina's room was shut, she turned to her daughter with a face of dismay.

"My dear child, this is too awful! You will excuse my saying it, but such a dreadful little room!"

Christina was on the defensive at once; whatever might be her private opinion of the Stoddarts, they and all that belonged to them were certain of a vigorous defence.

"When people are poor," she said, "that means small rooms. It is very good of you to have come, mamma."

"I was determined to come," said Lady Frederick, with noble firmness. "I thought it my duty. But I own to you that I didn't expect it to be so bad. I thought these sort of people were always rich. My dear child, all I want is to see the baby, and then you must put on your hat—I hope you don't get your hats in Manchester?—and come with me to your father."

"I have never been out——" Christina began, reluctantly.

"I don't wonder. Who would go out for pleasure in a place like this. But I suppose you want to see your father. I managed to persuade him not to come here; for I knew if he did, he'd make some mistake—be too rude or too familiar, especially as there are girls. You mentioned sisters, I believe?"

"Mamma," said Christina, "you must please remember that the people in this house have been very good to me, and that they are my relations."

"My poor child, I am remembering it—don't you see how careful I am to remember it?" said Lady Frederick, in such a lugubrious tone that Christina could not help laughing, though she did not feel very merry.

"And I never saw such a wreck as you look, or anything so unbecoming to you as that tea-gown. Christina, if you will come up to town with me in May, I will give you some dresses—that is to say, if I can screw something out of your father in the meantime to keep madame in a good temper."

Christina shook her head dejectedly.

"Won't the man let you go?"

"I couldn't possibly," said Christina, very decidedly. "Don't let us talk about it, mamma; tell me about things at home. I want to hear about everything."

Downstairs, a warm discussion was going on in the Stoddart family as to what was to be done.

Mrs. Stoddart's advice, which was to do nothing, was at once overruled.

Their economical souls were vexed by the waiting cabman, and they were troubled about the grand person in the hall. Was she a companion, a friend, or a maid? Ought they to invite her into the drawing room or leave her in the hall, or—was it possible?—send her to the kitchen?

In the fear of making some awful mistake, they left her where she was; they would have been glad to pretend that they knew not of her existence had they not been obliged to pass her or remain shut up in one room.

Then Kate, as the boldest, volunteered to follow tea upstairs to Christina's room. She was conscious of a new dress in which she looked her best, and she was curious. Besides, George, whose courage filled his family with admiration, promised to follow in a few minutes and support her.

The baby had been shown and removed. Christina and her mother were sitting on the sofa talking, with the first difficulties of meeting over.

Lady Frederick first saw Kate, as she stood rather shyly by the door, and made a mistake, which Christina, perhaps unjustly, believed to be purposely made.

"Christina," she said, "here's your maid."

Poor Kate flushed a vivid crimson. Christina feared for the moment that there would be some kind of passionate outbreak, and she turned upon her mother with a sharp and indignant explanation.

To Kate she was suddenly affectionate for the first time in their acquaintance.

"This is my sister Kate. Kate dear, will you make tea?"

Lady Frederick rose.

"Thank you very much, Miss Stoddart, but I am afraid we can't wait."

"Oh, please do, mamma," said Christina, firmly. "I want some tea awfully before I go out."

Lady Frederick yielded with good grace.

George appeared a few minutes later, full of civilities.

"I hope you will come back to dinner, and bring Lord Frederick."

Lady Frederick gave him a charming smile.

"Thank you immensely, no. We couldn't think of inflicting ourselves upon you."

"It is not the slightest trouble—is it, Kitty? is it, Kate?" said George, a little surprised by the silence of his womenkind. "It would be a pleasure to us all. Won't you pay my mother a visit in the drawing room, and hear her say so, too?"

"Thank you; I am afraid we are too much hurried."

"At least I hope you will allow me to escort you to your hotel," George persisted, undauntedly.

"You are most kind, but the cab is quite full already," Lady Frederick replied, as amiably as ever.

Then she complimented him on the baby, and, by way of assuring his absence until then, expressed a hope that he would call for Christina at their hotel, a little before eleven.

George was charmed with his mother-in-law, though a little disappointed that he had not been asked to dine.

But he saw them off with a radiant face, glad that this little pleasure had come in Christina's way, and went back to his family full of Lady Frederick's praises.

He was a little surprised that Kate did not back him up, but the reason why he did not hear. It was not confided even to Charles.

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTINA had not believed that anything would make her feel cheerful; she was surprised to find herself that evening roused out of her depression, and with her troubles driven to the background of her mind. She almost felt as if everything—her marriage to George, her parting with McLeod—might have been only part of a bad dream.

Her mother was very kind and her father was affectionate. They said nothing against George or his people—barely mentioned them, in fact, and for the most part treated Christina as if the Stoddarts had not existed.

They talked about the people, the things, and the books that she knew; the servants called her "miss," and she felt herself borne back into the old life, which as a memory appeared so entirely delightful.

George's arrival to take her home came as a shock, and somehow he seemed worse, more vulgar, more self-complacent than when she had parted with him a few hours before.

How could she ever have seen him and her father together without realizing the difference? She wondered at herself of four years ago.

George in the cab as they drove home had plenty to say.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself, old child. Your mother was very pleasant. She seems to have put Kate's back up somehow; but she was very civil to me, wasn't she? Did she say anything about the boy, or did your father give any hint?"

Christina shook her head.

"Well, Kitty, I've had an offer since I saw you."

"So have I," said Christina.

"Have you? As good an offer as mine, I wonder—I doubt it." Christina began to see that George was excited.

"You remember what I told you about George Sandford's mills? Well, he's made me the offer I told you about. He wants a trustworthy man to manage and oversee his machinery, and he has offered me the post. Isn't that a bit of good news, eh?"

Christina showed plenty of interest now.

"George, that means—does it mean to leave the navy?"

"Of course it does, and I shall be sorry to say good-by to the service. But it isn't the thing for a married man. Now I have got a wife and a son, I want to stay at home with them."

"To leave the navy," Christina repeated, stupidly.

"Yes," said George, a little disappointed; "you are not so devoted to my blue coat as all that, are you, dear? Wouldn't you rather have me always at home?"

It was well for him that he was obtuse and that Christina's stammered words of approval contented him.

"But, George," she said, "there is nothing to be done immediately, is there? Mr. Sandford doesn't mean at once?"

"I don't see much good in delay," said George, a little surprised. "I am going on a regular tour of inspection to-morrow round the mills, and after that I see no reason why we should not decide at once. And now you know my offer; what is yours? Something about the boy?"

"Yours is quite enough to think about for one day," said Christina, hastily.

Her offer called for a decision she alone could make, a decision for which George's news left very little time.

Was she willing to give up George, practically if not absolutely, and to go back to her old home and her old way of living? With George in the navy, and a foreign station before him in a year or two, this cutting free would have been very different and looked very different from what it would be if he retired.

She said nothing about her offer, but all evening she thought of nothing else.

The house seemed to her gloomier and smaller and dirtier than ever as George and she came in, to find everybody else had gone to bed.

Christina went to bed, too, but she did not even try to sleep.

If George did not leave the navy, it could all be so easily done. It could in some way be worked—surely it could—that he should always have foreign stations, and for the short times he was at home she would endure, gladly endure, for the sake of her freedom at other times.

There need not be an absolute break, though undoubtedly she would have to give George pain.

He would be hurt, but he would soon forget—very soon, and be happy enough.

Men were all brutes—every one of them. When you were out of their sight, they forgot—forgot easily, and consoled themselves—as George had done during the three years he had been without her.

But to pursue this view of the subject did not lead to justification of the course Christina wanted to take, rather the reverse.

She thought of the child; surely it would be the best thing for him. He would have a good education, he would be brought up among gentlemen, and the property would be his—that was part of the offer.

Whereas, if he grew up in Manchester, among George's friends, with a second-rate education, or even with the best in the world—— Do what she would, how could she expect her influence to do everything, and in the end what would be his position?

It would be unbearable—her whole life would be unbearable. What a terrible, unendurable existence she must face if she refused the offer. There was her writing; she would be free to carry on that as she pleased if she were free from George.

She would be free to live her own life, to be happy if she could, and forget if she could—at least she would be free. She would leave behind her this little room, these people, and, above all, George.

Christina might have wavered for days had not the necessity for decision been before her.

As it was, at breakfast next morning—the first breakfast she had had downstairs for many a long month—she came to a decision.

It was all so horrid. George, in his joy at having her there, was more effusive than usual; the girls' collars were soiled, and the little maid paddled about in slipshod shoes, with a smutty face and apron.

The temptation to be free from all this was too strong for her.

When George had gone out to the mills and Maggie

was in the shop, Christina hastily put on her hat and coat. She would go to the station and tell her father and mother she had decided.

All her dislike for going out was put aside now in this strong purpose.

She stole nervously down the stairs, afraid of being caught or questioned, opened the door softly, and went out into the street.

CHAPTER XVI.

She hurried through the streets towards the station. She had not so entirely forgotten her nervousness as to be willing to drive if she could help it. Besides, she had plenty of time, and in her excitement she felt perfectly strong.

She would not allow herself to think. She hurried on, driving back remembrance of George's happy face that morning.

She was going to forget George, McLeod, every one connected with this last year.

Suddenly she raised her eyes, and found herself almost face to face with Campbell.

There was no mistaking him—no mistaking his small, slight figure and freckled face. Christina had met him almost daily in Malta, though she had never known him well.

And now, he had dropped from the clouds to meet her in Market Place, Manchester.

With an absurd instinct, she was half moved to turn and fly. She even wavered and swerved for a moment, as though to escape by crossing the street.

But Campbell saw her, and sprang forward with her name.

"Mrs. Stoddart!"

Christina faced him breathlessly.

She had not yet brought herself to the point of reasoning that the meeting, which was almost tragic for her, might be to him essentially commonplace.

"I have something to say to you," said Campbell.

Christina felt herself growing white.

Had he found out? Had he come to accuse her?

"I have a message for you," said Campbell.

"A message?"

As they stood in the street passers-by jostled them, and to escape this they began quite unconsciously to walk on side by side, with odd pauses and stoppings.

Christina had forgotten all about her people at the station, and she neither knew nor thought where she was going.

Campbell on his part was obviously a little disturbed, and very much embarrassed.

"A message?"

"From McLeod," he said.

"From McLeod?"

Her transfigured, wonderful look warned Campbell what he was doing.

"He gave it to me a year ago," he said, in a low, hasty voice.

"Ah!" The sudden light faded out of Christina's face. It had been so impossible, and yet for one minute it had not seemed impossible, that McLeod should never have died; he had always seemed such an unlikely person to die.

Campbell felt he had bungled over his mission.

"I am ashamed," he said, "of being a year late. But the fact of the matter is I put it off and off at first, and then I lost your address. I knew it was Manchester, but nothing more, and though I thought of writing under cover to your husband—well, I didn't."

Christina listened impatiently. Since delay there had been, what did the causes of delay matter to her?

She did not trouble to speculate about Campbell or their meeting at all.

"You remember," said he, "that when you were leaving you asked me to take a parcel to McLeod. Do you remember?"

What a mockery the question seemed! Had there been a day or an hour ever since when she had not remembered?

"Go on," she said.

"I went to see poor McLeod that afternoon," said

Campbell, "and—well, there had been a sort of coolness between us, I am sorry to say, but we made it all right. And then I gave him your parcel."

"Yes?"

A couple of George's Manchester friends afterwards reported that Mrs. Stoddart had stared directly in their faces, and cut them dead.

Christina would not have recognised George himself just then.

She and Campbell were in a little world of their own.

"Bones was awfully upset about it," Campbell said, unconsciously relapsing into regimental language; "he began to call himself a damned brute—I beg your pardon—and said he had behaved to you like a selfish scoundrel. And all the time he held on like grim death to your parcel."

"Go on."

"I knew it was all rot his talking of behaving like a brute to any woman, and I am just telling you what the poor fellow said for what it is worth——"

"Oh, do go on!" said Christina, desperately.

Campbell did not know exactly what point Mrs. Stoddart wished him to come to.

"But when I was going away, he suddenly handed me back the parcel, just as it was, and told me to take it away. I tried to persuade him it was nonsense, and that he ought to keep it——"

"You did that?"

"But he began to get excited. I must take it at once, and I must find you and give it back to you. I was to tell you he was full of thankfulness, and to ask you to forgive his selfishness, and say he wasn't such an utter brute, when he came to think, as to sacrifice you to save himself. Something like that he talked, poor fellow, whatever queer crook he had got in his brain. I had to promise to do what he wanted."

"You took it away?" said Christina, in a hoarse voice, not like her own.

"There was nothing else to do," said Campbell, in tones of apology.

Then he suddenly started forward, afraid that Mrs.

Stoddart was going to faint. But she recovered herself in a moment.

"You took it away—you are sure—*sure?*"

"Quite sure."

"But you never brought it to me?"

"I didn't think there was much reason for hurry. I called in at the club, and—when I got to the Quarantine Harbour—the ship was just going out."

"My God!" said Christina. How much Campbell might have spared her! What days and nights of misery! That delay of his had been a frightful cruelty.

"But did he never ask?"

Campbell was beginning to see that he had made a mistake somewhere.

"I told him," he said—"I told him it was all right. What else could I do, poor chap? I thought it was all some mad fancy. I am afraid, Mrs. Stoddart, I have somehow done more wrong than I know."

"He was as sane as you or I, just then," said Christina. "I am glad he did it—oh, thank God he did it, for his sake as well as mine!"

Campbell found a difficulty in knowing what to say. He could apologize for his carelessness, but there was evidently much more in the whole affair than he understood.

Christina suddenly turned upon him.

"If it is all true what you have said, how does it come that he is dead?" she said.

Neither of them took in the full significance of her words just at first.

Campbell answered simply.

"It was on the voyage home. They watched him, of course; he had two men looking after him. But, however it happened, one evening after they had passed Gib., he—went overboard!"

"He always said it would be the sea," said Christina, softly.

They walked on in silence. Christina as yet hardly realized the full relief of the weight of a man's death lifted off her shoulders.

The gladness of finding McLeod's memory without

shade of selfishness was filling her mind, driving out all other thoughts.

"You might have saved me from a year of—*hell!*" she said to Campbell.

It seemed natural, and of the usual organization of things on this exceptional day, that to Campbell, whom she knew slightly, and with whom she had never exchanged more than the veriest small talk of society, it should be quite simple and easy to make the confidence she had once thought never to make to any one.

"Do you know what I thought I had done? I thought I had killed him," she said.

The words came so easily now. She could explain it all to Campbell, bringing him, as it were, every step of the way with her, teaching him all that McLeod had suffered and all the suffering he had seen before him, and then, without a pause, she told him what she had promised to do, and what she had done.

That day she and Campbell seemed absolutely the only two people in the world to be considered, and she felt sure he would understand.

Campbell understood. He was drawn and influenced by her mood and by the memory of his hero.

For these few hours these two, who had been strangers until now, and would be strangers a few hours hence, were drawn into a very odd and very close understanding.

"I am sorry for you," he said, "if I had only known!"

"If you had known," said Christina, "would you have carried my parcel?"

"I hope so," said Campbell, colouring to the roots of his fair hair.

"If you had," said Christina, passionately, "it would have haunted you night and day afterwards; it would have been something you could never forget—something that would never let you forget or be like other people for a moment."

"McLeod knew that," said Campbell.

They had come in their wandering to a kind of people's park, and by a common impulse they went in and sat down together on a deserted bench. It was not perhaps the wisest

proceeding on a winter day, but neither of them was in a mood to feel the cold.

"Don't you wonder," said Campbell, "how he ever had the pluck—how he could bring himself to live on among other people with *that* over him?"

"Yes," said Christina, "and what the *use* of it was."

"He would have said, 'Go straight as far as you can see, and don't bother about what you can't understand,'" said Campbell; "there was plenty of use in McLeod's life, anyway. I couldn't tell you all he has done for the regiment. If I speak for myself, Mrs. Stoddart"—Campbell coloured, and began to make rings in the dust with his stick, but he went on nevertheless—"I was going pretty well to the devil last winter, and letting everything slide. McLeod knew I was in a hole all round, and had no prospect of getting out of it, and he left me money enough to clear me at Malta and at home. So I had a fresh chance, and when I got an opening to change everything, I took it. I am honestly doing my level best to pull up."

"I am so glad," said Christina.

She remembered how McLeod had liked Campbell, and how he had tried and failed to keep him straight.

"I don't know how it will all end," said Campbell; "it's not easy to pull up when a fellow has made such a fool and a beast of himself as I have. It was an awful wrench leaving the regiment, but I saw well enough it was the only chance for a fellow who has as little pluck as I have. I have an uncle in the city, and he's given me a chance. I've been here on business this last week, and I've often wondered about you. But if I'd known, I'd have gone through every street and knocked at every door till I found you."

"And so you've left the army," said Christina, a little regretfully.

"Yes; anyway, Beresford and McLeod, the best of the regiment, were gone. McFerran has turned into an aide-de-camp, and gone to Canada; Grant is in the Egyptian army; and Seton-Kerr has taken your flat, and is going to be married to Miss Ruskin-Boyd next month. It is all changed."

"And they are all going to the opera, and dancing and

riding just as they did last winter," said Christina, with a long sigh. "After all, what does it matter what becomes of you or me? We are so very unimportant."

"It does matter very much," said Campbell, sturdily.

They had come into the everyday world again, and he was beginning to want his lunch.

They had said all they wanted to say.

Christina began to feel a wish to be alone, to face her life from this new standpoint, with the new relief and courage Campbell had brought her. She felt as if she were gradually arousing from a black nightmare.

She got up and held out her hand.

"Good-by," she said. "I don't think you will ever know quite all this afternoon has done for me. But I want you to remember this: if you find it hard to keep your life straight, it isn't only you; I have been letting everything slide, too. And it isn't easy for me—it will never be easy."

"I will think of that," said Campbell.

"And thank God that you have got a second chance," said Christina, passionately; "so few men and women have —so bitterly few."

CHAPTER XVII.

"KITTY! Where in the world have you been? What happened to you?"

George and Kate both rushed to the door to let her in. They had been absolutely anxious about her, since George had come home and found her room empty.

Where had she gone to? What had become of her? Had she walked too far for her strength and fallen down fainting?

George had succeeded in getting himself and the whole household into a state of considerable fuss. He would have gone in search of her long ago had he known in what direction to go.

Now she came into the house, tired indeed, but with the dull stupefied look gone from her face, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

"Where *have* you been?" said George. "We were beginning to get regularly frightened about you, dear."

"I have been out getting a very useful thing—an entirely fresh point of view," said Christina, in her old bright voice.

Then she ran upstairs to take off her hat; of late her movements had always been languid.

How kind they all were, after their lights, and how ungrateful she had been—how selfish and effortless! Her old sense of justice was coming back to her, her old power of seeing from the side of other people.

Never, she realized, with suddenly wide-open eyes, never since the day when she had found that George had not been as absolutely true to her during the three years of their nominal marriage as she had thought, never had she honestly tried to face her life and make the best of it for him and herself. She had been kind at first, but of late not even that.

What right had she to expect that the world should be made for her, or that she should be happy, as if that were the most important thing—something which must be purchased at any price?

But could she bear it? Could she face the years and years and years which might be before her—the little rubs and troubles which seemed so unendurable just because they *were* so small—the utter loneliness to which she would condemn herself?

Christina in her own room, with McLeod's memory clearly with her, made up her mind to try.

This last day, this one more day she must have for herself to bury all her hopes and expectations, and make up her mind to face a drab, second-best life.

She was even more quiet and silent than usual, and kept much to her room.

When George came to tell her that, if she approved, he was anxious definitely to accept his cousin's offer and leave the navy, she only said quietly that she would be very glad if he did.

It would be the best thing most undoubtedly, as these partings and meetings were the worst. She would necessarily grow used to George if he were always with her, whereas his returns would mean a fresh difficulty each time.

She thought and considered all day, and by the next morning she was ready to speak.

"George," she said, "I want a long, private talk. Will you come to my room? I hear Sarah coming down, so I expect she has finished it."

"Well, but old child, I suppose I can't smoke there?"

"I didn't know you hadn't smoked," said Christina. "Will you come when you have finished, then?"

She had no intention of allowing him to smoke in her room; now that she had definitely decided to live with him, she must not make it unbearable by being too yielding.

Either George's politeness or his curiosity proved stronger than his desire to smoke, for he did not keep Christina waiting. She made him put a match to the fire, which had just been laid, and found him a comfortable chair.

She herself preferred to stand before the fireplace.

George was not altogether an unattractive-looking man when he was sitting down—when he was standing, there was always something too consequential about his attitude.

Christina could not help noticing his sloping shoulders, and the bald patch which was beginning to come on the top of his head; but he was not otherwise badly made, and his face was pleasant enough.

She stood before him like an arraigned prisoner, with nervously clasped hands.

"George," she said, "I want to begin by apologizing for all my horridness. My only excuse—and not much of a one—is that I have really not been well."

"Of course, old child. Never mind all that," said George, good-humouredly.

She had been cross and disagreeable, but, as she said, she had not been well, and, if it was all over, why worry about it? He bore no malice.

"I hope very much," said Christina, steadily, "that you will forgive me. I am going to do better now, I hope."

It was really to satisfy her own conscience that she

spoke; she knew that George would never guess or understand what it cost her, and he did not know how much he had to forgive.

"Come and give me a kiss, little woman, and don't be morbid. People can't help being cross when they are ill."

"You always make excuses for me," said Christina, with a faint smile. Then she began in a different voice.

"And now, George, I want to come to business. We have lived for a year on very little, and surely any small debts we had must be paid. I understand more about economy, and you will be making more money. Mightn't we—I should like it so much—take a house of our own?"

George's face fell a little.

"A house of our own?" he said; "I am afraid, dear, the mother will be vexed."

"I have thought about it," said Christina, "and I don't think she will. But, in any case, we can't go on living squashed up like this. George dear, I want a house of my very own, and servants of my very own, and nice rooms, and a big nursery for the baby."

George's face brightened at the cheerfulness of her tone. Christina planned it all out for him.

They would get out all their trunks, which were stored, and they would have Maltese screens and rugs and curtains in abundance to begin with.

They might perhaps live a little way out of town; George liked walking, and on fine days Christina would go and meet him, and bring the baby when he was a little older. It would be just the place for Mrs. Stoddart to come and stay sometimes to be strengthened.

They would have a garden, and all her life long to have a garden had been an unfulfilled dream of Mrs. Stoddart's.

They would have a dog, and perhaps after awhile a pony, and George could once again keep his canaries at home.

They settled it all, even to the number of rooms they wished for, and an obligatory bow window for the drawing room.

George became quite happy; he forgot his fear of hurting his mother.

Christina, as she herself mapped out their days, found

their future life brought with sharp clearness before her. Could she endure it? If she did, it must be by facing and bearing each day as it came—she must never look ahead.

George, leaning back radiantly in his chair, thinking over their new home, was astonished at the abruptness and almost roughness with which she plunged into a new subject.

She had something more to say to him, the most difficult thing of all; but it must be decided and at once.

"Do you remember, George, when I first came out to Malta——"

There was a long pause, so long that he believed she must have finished her sentence.

"Of course I do," he said, laughing; "do you think I have forgotten?"

Christina went on, with her eyes steadily fixed on the growing fire.

"I talked to you then about—my writing——" she said.

George started and frowned.

"Why, Kitty, I hoped you had forgotten all about that!"

"I haven't forgotten it," said Christina. She stood absolutely still; she would not help on her cause by a caress.

"I never forget it. If you and I are to be happy, we must both give in. I *can't* give up this one thing."

George was perturbed and worried. Since Christina had never spoken of her writing, he had, judging her by himself, concluded that she had forgotten about it.

"But, Kitty, I don't like it—I can't say I like it."

"I hope you will give in to me in this," said Christina. "I will try to be a good wife, but in this, George, you must yield. I can't give it up."

"Kitty!"

"I *can't*. I will try not to write what you disapprove of, and no one need ever know—no one need even guess. But it is a condition, George. You must think it over and decide."

George was startled and alarmed. He saw Christina meant a good deal by her words.

She realized that he understood. If she gave up every-

thing else in her life to George, this was the one pleasure she intended to keep for herself.

She *must* have something to think about—some outside interest.

That evening she spoke to Mrs. Stoddart of the move she proposed, and to her relief found that her plan was entirely approved of.

Her mother-in-law brightened up at once in answer to Christina's changed manner; she had been very unhappy about her son, and the position of aloofness which her son's wife had taken up.

"I have been waiting for this," she said; "I often thought of it myself, but I wanted to leave it to you. It is much the best thing you can do."

Christina drew her chair close to Mrs. Stoddart, and turned her face away.

"I have been very rude and disagreeable," she said; "you must think George has a bad wife; but I will try to be better—indeed, I will try."

Mrs. Stoddart's look was a very kindly one.

"I knew it would come right," she said, softly; "as one grows older one understands so many things come right with a little patience."

Christina answered with a half caress of Mrs. Stoddart's hand; it was not her way to express herself demonstratively.

"My dear, I know you are a brave woman," her mother-in-law said. "It's not easy for you. I don't know that it will ever be easy. But you'll remember George is an honest man and a good man, and you won't bring up his son to look down upon him because of a little thing here and there?"

"I will not," said Christina. "I will never forget he is his son as well as mine."

If George himself had only been like his mother! If there had been one point where he and Christina could meet and understand each other! But George did not even know that there was any want of understanding between them.

In her room, before she went to bed that night, she wrote to her mother and told her how she had decided.

But for the strange chance of her meeting with Camp-

bell, it would have been for her to break to George the wrong she intended to do him.

Whatever her life might be, Christina felt she was glad she had met him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

In her own room in her own house, Christina was sitting by the open window.

She had drawn up her writing table close into the summer breeze, a writing table in a state of methodical untidiness, which would have baffled any one but its owner.

The baby was contentedly playing with a dog at her feet; he was a yellow-pated little person, with eyes like his mother's and fat unsteady legs under his white frock. He had kept his first birthday four months ago, and could say many words.

The dog was a fox terrier, and had reached an age of wisdom. He was a dog who had sorrowed much and truly for his master, but who, like human beings, had in time got over his sorrow, and his name was Jinks.

Campbell had sent him to Christina, moved by some instinct he did not try to explain to himself.

Had Jinks forgotten? If he had, when he and his mistress were alone together, why did he prick up his ears and whine with excitement at McLeod's name? Many a time and oft had he followed a kilted soldier for long hours, hoping against hope that he might lead him to his lost master. The distinction of facings and sporrans were beyond his comprehension.

But he was happy enough now, having his ears and tail pulled as he rolled on the ground with Master Frederick George Stoddart.

Christina had stopped writing, and was looking thoughtfully out of the window when George came in.

He had grown a little stouter and coarser in this last year, but, as she had hoped, their daily association had deadened her perception of the change.

He was excited, and waved a paper wildly in his hand.

"Here, Kitty! here's another review; upon my word, the fellow who wrote it has some sense! Here, read it: 'A capital story, will written and well planned. The reader's interest is roused in the first chapter, and goes on steadily increasing to the end, which is somewhat abrupt. While never descending to melodrama, the scene in which Alison yields to her husband's entreaties for means of ending his frightful sufferings is painfully realistic.' And then again: 'Alison and her husband both actually *live*. However much her action may be reprobated, the reader can not but feel that in her eyes it was entirely justified.' And then at the end: 'We hope and expect to hear more of Mr. Chris. Lorrimer.' There, Kitty! Where's the book? I want to paste it in at once."

"You are a goose!" said Christina, laughing. "I suppose that is out of some wonderful Post or Mercury or Herald, that we have never heard of before or never will again! You weren't in such a hurry to paste the last review in that wonderful book of yours."

"No, and I am not going to put it in! A fool, who hadn't read the story, and thought himself mighty clever! Such idiots as that oughtn't to be allowed to make asses of themselves in print!" said George, hotly indignant.

"My dear George, you always say that when the reviewer doesn't praise me," said Christina. His growing enthusiasm amused her very much; she could not help laughing at it, though it pleased her.

George was hunting through one of the table drawers, which was his especial property, and in which he kept a book wherein he pasted all favourable criticisms of Christina's work, while all that were unfavourable were consigned to the fire as the production of fools or people who had not read what they were discussing.

"Kitty," he said, "don't you think we might just as well let people know now? I don't see much use in keeping it a secret. Wouldn't they all be astonished?"

"Why, George!"

But George had almost forgotten that he had ever disapproved of her writing, and it was better not to insist on his remembering.

"It is most wonderful," he said; "and it is so true what this other review says, that if it isn't collaborated work, it is extraordinary how the same person can so thoroughly understand what a man feels and what a woman feels, too. By Jove! it made my flesh creep. And her feeling after she gave him the poison! How in the world do you do it, you clever little woman?"

Christina smiled rather sadly.

She could not tell George how much a certain strange fragment of a play, sent by Campbell, had helped her. That was her secret, kept with a dead man.

She had put all her soul into this story. It had meant much more to her than any of the rest, for she had written into it the very thoughts of her heart.

No one would ever know that the sufferings of that man and that woman were the veriest literal truth. They were two real human beings to Christina, a sort of link between her and McLeod. They were a part of herself, and yet they had distinct lives and individualities of their own; and to the woman, in her greater strength, Christina sometimes felt herself turning, and trying to view the difficulties of her life through the eyes of Alison, who had given all for her great love.

George fussed out of the room to look for paste, and the baby got up and supported himself for a few careful steps till he could grasp his mother's dress.

She put her arm round him and drew him close.

"Dear," she said, "I wonder what sort of a man you are going to grow up, with those honest eyes of yours. I should like you to be a man like some one your mother used to know."

Little Frederick stared solemnly in her face; he looked as if he understood, and was noting her words.

Christina went on talking to him gravely.

"And if you have Yardon Park some day—but that is a subject your father is too fond of talking about, and I don't intend it to be mentioned to you when you are a little older—however, my wise son, if you *do* ever have Yardon Park, I should like you best of all to be a soldier, and to go into the Cameron Highlanders."

Jinks pricked up his ears and whined.

The baby, who understood less, propounded a request for something good to eat, and his father, whose entrance had as usual suggested "sweeties," forthwith fulfilled his desires, unheeding a faint protest from Christina.

Christina sat playing with her pen, while George read selected reviews to his offspring.

He at least was happy.

There were times when Christina half hoped, half feared that she, too, was growing content. But dark days came to her, when she felt as if she *must* break free.

Would she be able to live always as she had done through this long year? Was it in her nature to put herself and the possibilities of her life aside forever? Was it even well or right?

Christina looked across at George, and told herself, as she often told herself, that she could do it.

"There are twelve reviews, Kitty!" he broke in, radiantly; "dear old child, it's splendid—perfectly splendid! Come over and talk to me."

Christina put down her pen and went to his side.

THE END.

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